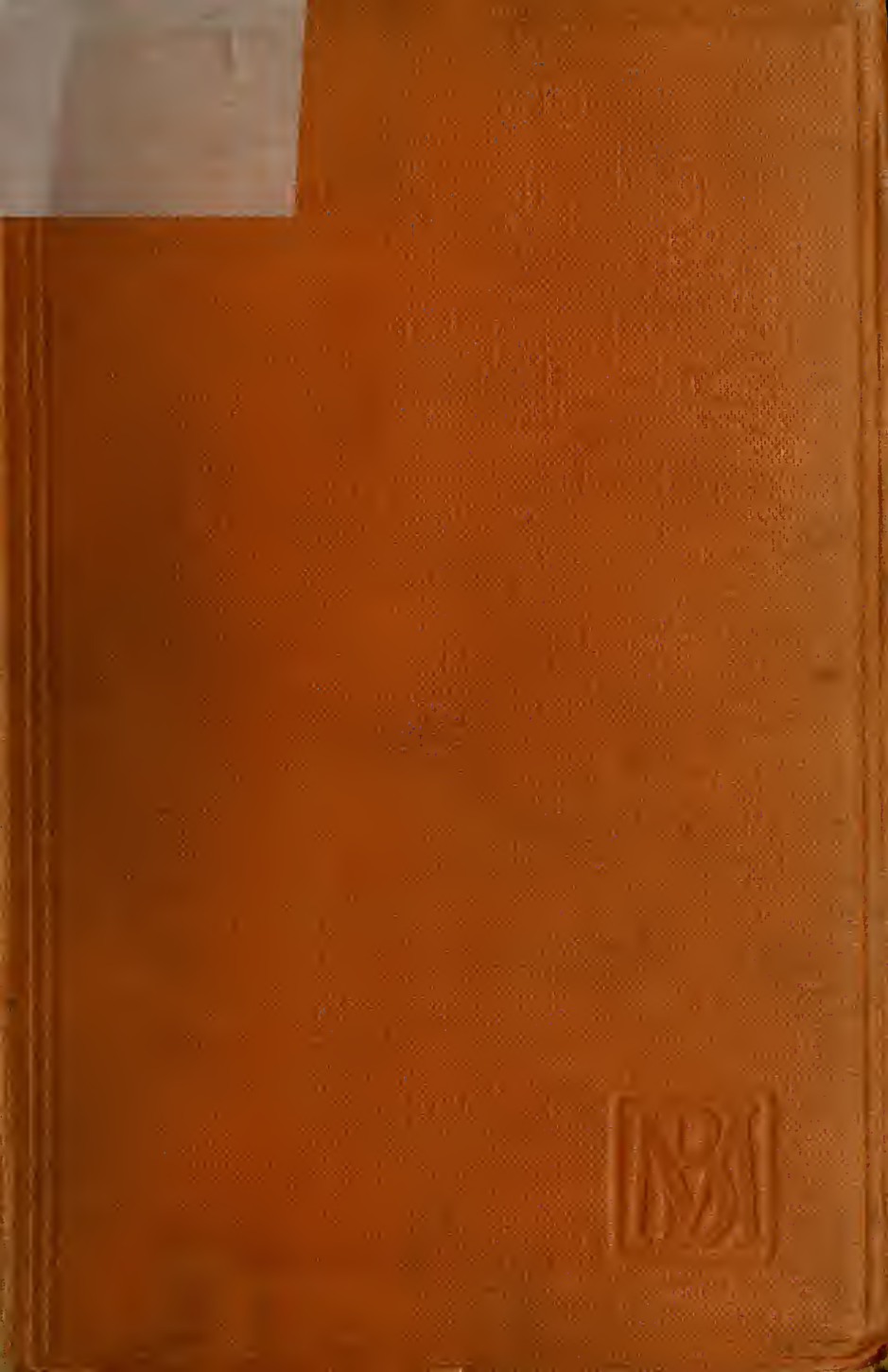

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BEAUTIFUL END

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

CRUMP FOLK GOING HOME
THE LONELY PLOUGH
THE OLD ROAD FROM SPAIN

"The yew's tall finger pointing to the sky"

"Nobody's shadow could tread on your heels"

BEAUTIFUL END

BY

CONSTANCE HOLME

"Houses not made with hands"

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"THE PLACE FOR WHICH I CRY"

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The author wishes to state that no character in this book is drawn from any living person.

BEAUTIFUL END

I

SHE put her hand to the curtain for the last time and drew back. Very reluctantly she admitted to herself that now there was nothing left to do. Here was the room really finished at last, and none of her wistful glances from side to side could find her a fresh task. She had lingered over it as long as she possibly could, but now the pleasant work had really come to an end. Everything had to come to an end so that other things might begin, but the hours of toil had been so sweet that she hated to let them go. The room seemed full of the tunes she had sung as she painted and scrubbed, full of plans and pleased thoughts and thrills of housewifely pride. It stood, of course, for so very much more than just a simply-furnished chamber in a simple house. It stood, for instance, for the end of a self-reproach marring a happiness otherwise complete. It meant the comforting

of a hurt which still troubled her kind soul, however unwillingly it had been wrought. It meant return and renewal on better lines, the rebuilding of ancient things with better hands. . . .

In the upstairs room of the marsh farmhouse there was a great pleasantness and peace. The early evening sun drove straight towards it from the west, and through its deep-set eyes sent shining ladders all across the floor. Only the corners of the room stayed dim and aloof.

Now that all was done, and so thoroughly done, she was puzzled to find herself depressed. Perhaps it was nothing more than the nervous doubt which foreruns every great moment just at the last. Perhaps it was just the regret that lies like a sigh under the chant of pride in a finished task. Certainly, nobody else would ever see the room exactly as it looked to herself. Nobody would see, as she could see, not only the finished whole, but the work and the joy that had made it what it was. That meant, of course, that when she passed out for the last time, the room's own perfect moment would pass as well. Therefore she lingered and looked, hoping for the chance of a further touch, but however she looked, she could think of nothing else.

Even after she had ceased to wonder she

could not tear herself away. The low room was not only a room, such as anybody might prepare for a guest ; it was a refuge, a place for himself that she had made for a stray. She had stained the floor with her own hands, and washed the knitted quilt on the bed. She had made the white valances with their borders of knitted lace, the cloth rug by the bedside, the white window-curtains with their pleated frills. She had distempered the white walls and polished the chest of drawers so that the brass-bound Bible on its top was reflected deeply as in a pool. All the paint was white ; perhaps she was proudest of the paint. The new bedstead was iron, with brass knobs crowning its slender posts. In a crinkly vase on one sill was a posy of coloured flowers. . . . Surely the old man would be able to rest here ?

The windows of the room were so full of sun that they looked like translucent plates of beaten gold. Beyond them, the scene was so bright that it hurt the eye—the river shining and glinting close below the farm, the sands all sparkling as if they were sown with quartz, and the houses across the bay snow-white against the hill. The tide was dead out—at the end of the world it seemed ; yet never at any time was it very far. Always, when you had forgotten it, it came stealing back, a thief in the night, a

trespasser by day. Even now she had not grown used to the tides, though she did not look out of the windows all the time, as she had done when she first arrived on the marsh. But he, when he came, would look out of the windows all day long. . . . She stood in the long rays, staring round the room, her blue eyes frowning a little as she looked. Her young, firm figure was full of energy and strength. Her dark hair was ruffled and her cheek flushed with the final effort that was actually the last.

Very soon now the old man would be here, and the room that had once been his for so long would be his again. He would find things a good deal changed, it was true, but how much for the better, after all! No doubt the place had been well enough once, years and years ago, perhaps, when he was first wed, but it had been only a poor spot later on. It had had a neglected look from the outside, and the fields and hedges seemed to ask for a hand. At the last, of course, it had been a desolate place, indeed. . . . By accident, as it happened, she had seen the room before he left, and the desolation of it still haunted her mind. The old wooden bedstead had been rickety all through, and there was never a mat on the bare, unvarnished boards. In the quilt grown thin as a rag there was a jagged tear, and in each of the ceiling-corners a

spider had spun a web. The once blue-washed walls had faded a dirty grey, and the plaster was crumbling away where the damp had driven in. The windows had broken hasps, and one had a broken pane ; all dim they were, mysterious with crusted salt . . . and by the bed had stood a pair of old woman's shoes. She remembered the shoes because they had been his wife's. It was weeks, she remembered—months—after she was dead.

A dismal room indeed it had seemed to the girl, a forlorn place thoroughly in tune with a forlorn human old age. She remembered how she laid hands on it, then as now, mending the quilt and fetching the spiders from their homes, spending a lusty scrubbing on the floor. Even then she had had a vision of what she would some day make of the place, plotting and planning and laughing as she toiled. She had never put her head inside that room, it seemed, but some web of contrival at once began to spin. Of course it was not exactly as she had planned, because every creation meddles with the tools, but it was near enough to satisfy her, nevertheless. It was inevitable somehow . . . intended . . . definitely right. It seemed inevitable, too, that she herself should be here, although she had questioned and delayed her fate so long. She felt sure, when she looked back, that she had

known it to be inevitable all the time; that just the same personal interest had gone to that far-away putting of things to rights. But she had not been ready for Thomas, just then, and the future had had to take care of itself. Thomas's father, however, had not been able to care for himself. In the midst of her indecision he had had to quit. The trouble had gone further than just an unswept room. . . .

And yet, in spite of the intervening break, her fate and the room's fate had fulfilled themselves in time. She had come in the end to the place ordained, just as the changes she had meant for the room had come about. Now it was all scoured clean, painted and stained, with a new iron bed that had full command of its legs, and four little knobs like four little globes of gold. Her second scrubbing had been so thorough that it almost seemed as if there was nothing of the old room left. Even the dust and dimness had had a character of their own, and both of them had been swept away. Even the windows looked a different shape now they were frames for those shining plaques of gold. They were like young eyes now, shining and clear, where before they were ancient and blurred with tears . . . eyes with a whole world behind them under the sky, instead of blankness staring at nothing without sight.

Yet something lingered that belonged to the old room, something that was perhaps nothing more than a question in the air. That was the reason, perhaps, why she hesitated to call her work complete, since the room seemed to cry upon her for something else. It seemed to be waiting for something to come back; she wondered vaguely if it was the old woman's shoes. She would have brought them back right willingly if she could, but she had never seen or heard of them since that day. Probably they had gone at the sale, or simply been lost or burnt or thrown away. It was out of the question, anyhow, to think of finding them now. If the room was waiting for that, it would have to do without.

She felt sure that, even in its best days, the room had never looked so fine, even in those far-off days when the house had freshened itself for another bride. There might have been curtains, perhaps—perhaps not upstairs—but almost certainly there had been no blinds. Little need for them, indeed, with windows facing the lone sands, and a white-sailed yacht at the flood the only passer-by. And she was certain that, not for years, if ever before, had roses been set upon the sill.

There was no doubt, however, that rooms, like folks, were growing smarter with the times.

Old as he was, the old man would know that, and would feel, if only unconsciously, the finer touch. He would be proud of a son's wife who had such ways; straight from his present home, indeed, how could he be anything but proud? And progress and new paint had not harried the old-time peace of the room, nor could she herself have done it real harm. The tradition behind her was too pure for that, the abiding spirit of the house too strong.

Rousing herself, she crossed the rays towards the door, but stopped on her way to run her hand along the quilt. The limbs that would lie under it would be snug enough, she thought, the head on the pillow would surely lie still. Stooping, she came on something soft to her foot, and started hastily aside. It was almost as if she had trodden and crushed the worn, old shoes. . . . But it was only the new cloth rug beside the bed.

Out on the landing she paused again, feeling the evening stillness warm through all the house. There were empty rooms right and left of her, empty, yet full of secrets, as empty rooms always are. When other things went out of the rooms, they filled them for themselves. Yet, in spite of their secrets, they seemed lonely sometimes, consciously waiting, like the room she had left;

but to-night they were only full of the sunny peace. She looked into them, one after the other, and shut them up again, and then out in the passage stood gazing at the doors. It was strange to live in a house with so many empty rooms. It was like living with people who never spoke, but were busily thinking all the time. A house with empty rooms could never be at its best. Something might come out of that brooding silence, such things as come from a mind for ever feeding on itself. She was sure that, when the winter nights came, she would start thinking of those empty rooms upstairs, hear voices, perhaps, and steps . . . if she left them too long to think things by themselves. She would put apples in one, she determined, when the fruit was ripe ; cheeses in another, when she started making cheese. There would be other things after a while to fill the rest—other things, other people, other thoughts—so that the rooms would not have time to grow lonely and queer. And at least one of them would have finished with being lonely by to-night. She found herself turning again to the room where her work was done, and only stopped herself at the handle of the door. Then she heard her husband moving in the kitchen below, and her dreamy mood fell from her and she ran down. There was carpet under her feet, she thought, as she ran. How

many years since the old man had seen new carpet on those stairs ?

Thomas had been busy redding himself up, and turned towards her a tanned but shining face. He was still in his working clothes, but he had shaved, and slipped his jacket over his rolled-up sleeves. There was health in the clean lines of his jaw and the warm colours of his skin, and kindness and honesty in his tranquil eyes. Only his mouth, firmly-cut and set, showed that he could be obstinate if driven too far. This was a man who saw one road at a time, and when once he was set on it could not turn aside. Agnes had known that face when it was dogged and harsh, heard passion and bitterness in the slow, deep voice, seen tortured and angry strength in the broad, slow form. But that was long ago, of course, before she had come to her senses and seen clear. To-night, Thomas's face shone as much with pleasure as with soap. Everything was an occasion for his smile, the slowly-broadening smile which thought before it came. He smiled as he turned instinctively towards the stair. He had not yet ceased to watch for her coming in. Often and often he had seen her in his mind before she was really there in front of his eyes. Now, as he watched, he saw her soft, blue gown paint itself clear on the dusk beyond the door.

The sun was in the kitchen, too, but in far greater power, because of the wider windows and the open porch, that was like some arching cave with a golden tide at the flood. Almost everything in the kitchen was new, and everything was scrubbed and polished as it had been upstairs. The dresser was as white as when the timber first yielded to the saw. The plates in the pot-rail were so many circular mirrors in the sun. And everything spoke of new housekeeping and newly-wedded pride. The legs of the table were shapely and smooth, unworn by the marks of large or little boots, unscarred by the clawings of generations of cats. There was an arm-chair to the side of the flashing fender and the modern range, an expensive-looking chair, with its castors shining and whole, its covers unfaded and its padding plump. The grandfather's clock had not yet settled to his corner place. Behind the warming-pan with its flat gold face, there was never a mark on the pale-coloured wall.

Out in the little garden the box hedges and borders looked almost black, making the roses between them a warmer, deeper red, and whitening the white rose over the cavern that was the porch. Beside the parlour window a tall yew stood up, clipped like Cleopatra's needle and as straight. The little garden had peculiarly the

air of refuge and close, set as it was between the desolation of the sands and the lesser and different desolation of the marsh. The marsh was lonely, of course, but Nature was always there, growing her grass and plants and flowers, her acorns and cones fashioning into trees, her thorn hedges throwing up every year their close and towering screens; and, after Nature, man, with his cattle and thin ploughs, his barns and shippons, his clustered chimney-stacks. But out on the sand there were only sand and lost shells, and the goalless footprints of flown birds. It was enemy ground, where neither blown seed nor human hearth might take hold. The marsh had a peace of its own as well as its fear; but out on the sands there was only fear.

One window in the kitchen pretended to itself that there was neither sand nor fear. It looked across the square fields to the higher land behind the marsh, over tall hedges thick with rose to sloping meadowland and woods. Up in the sky was a climbing, high-hung road, and below it a hidden village with a seeking spire. On the marsh between the straight hedges all the roads ran straight. . . . It was to this window that Agnes crossed to look out.

"Hadn't you best be getting off?" she enquired, pressing her face against the pane. "It'll never do to be hanging about and miss

your time. He'll likely think he's not wanted if you're a bit behind."

"Nay, there's no call to be off yet," Thomas replied tranquilly, without offering to move. "We'll catch a sight on 'em on t'road, long afore they're here." He settled his jacket leisurely, looking at himself in the little kitchen glass, mottled and cracked in its worn mahogany frame. It looked old and strange on the new face of the wall—almost the only thing in the kitchen that wasn't new. "'Twas half-past six, wasn't it, they said? It wants a bit to that yet."

"What was it you went and settled wi' Bob, after all?"

"I was to meet 'em at meader gate so as to give the old man an arm. It's over rough riding up for him, I doubt. He'll be best on his feet by a deal."

"Ay, old bones can't abide being rumbled about. I shouldn't wonder but he's a bit shaky after his ride, so you mun be sure to be there on the tick. . . . Eh, well, we'll have him as right as a bobbin afore so long!"

"It'll take a while, will that!" Thomas frowned. Staring, he saw the face in the glass grow older and rather grim. "He's been going downhill sharp, lately, has the old chap. Last time I was at the cottage he give me a fair fright.

It was a bad job his having to gang to Marget an' Bob."

He could see his wife through the glass beyond himself, and the face that she turned to him was clouded, too.

"Nay, what . . ." she began quickly, her voice troubled and sore. "That's by with, surely? You promised you'd let it bide."

Their eyes met in the glass, and he threw her a repentant nod. "Ay, that's so, and I mean to hold by it an' all." He drew a long breath, squaring his shoulders as if to an enemy threatening his peace. For a long moment he went on staring thoughtfully at himself, and when he spoke again it was with an obvious attempt at ease. "I reckon I don't favour the old dad much in the face; nay, nor Bob, neither, for the matter o' that."

"You don't take after him no way," Agnes answered, turning back. She gave a little sigh of relief as she stared again at the marsh. "Folk'd be hard put to it to tell you're the same breed. He's the light sort, for one thing, and you're that dark. He's fond of music and terble forgetful-like, and you're that set on your job, and wi' no more tune than an old bull."

Thomas laughed his good-tempered laugh.

"I'm not much in the singing line, I doubt, but I'm real fond o' music, all the same. He

was for ever trying to learn me the fiddle, but it wasn't no use. All the music I've gitten is in my heels."

"Ay, well, you're a bonny dancer—I'll give you that," she agreed. "So was Bob, poor lad, afore he got wed, but he's not much to crack on, nowadays, I doubt. All the spring'll be out on him, by now. He's been plagued and bothered over long."

"A bad missis'll do for a man quicker than a green Christmas," Thomas said. "There's nobbut once he'll have rued, I reckon, and that's all the time. He'd plenty o' warning an' all, if he'd nobbut took it, the daft fool! I never see such a time as she give him when they were courting—Marget an' Bob. Same as cat and mouse it were, only worse, and yet he couldn't frame to bide away. Come to that, he'd say we were a while about it, ourselves. . . ."

He saw her stiffen again as he said that, but this time she did not turn. Only the back of her smooth head was visible in the glass. "Ay, well, I'm one as looks afore they leap," she answered shortly, on a sharp note. . . . "Hadn't you best be thinking o' making a move?"

"It's over soon, I tell ye . . . there's no sign o' them yet." Suddenly he left the glass and came over to her side, leaning his arms along the window-frame. All the windows in the

kitchen were new, their sashes gleaming with fresh paint, broad windows that filled the place with pictures and the sun. "Seems like it couldn't be true," he went on, looking down at her cheek where it touched the stuff of his sleeve—"you an' me wed and at the farm, and the old dad coming back, after all. Seems like I'm only dreaming it's come true. . . . I doubt he'll want seeing to a bit, at first. He's not as young as he was, and he's terble down. You an' me we mun do for him all we can."

"We'll see to him, don't you fret!" Agnes said cheerfully, in her firm tones. "We'll have him so he won't know himself afore long, wi' nowt to cross him and the best to eat. It's queer if we can't shape better than Marget at the job. We ought to be shammed on ourselves if we can't, that's all!"

As if bent upon showing her willingness to begin, she left him to pick up the white cloth ready spread for a meal, and shook it on again with a hearty slap. Thomas, searching the roads of the marsh in her place, heard her busy behind him among the pots, her free step over the flags full of energy and goodwill. The clean air of the kitchen thrilled with kindly expectation and innocent pride. The sun and the cheerful room seemed the best setting in the world for the little scene of welcome that they

had planned. Even the weather had kept the right sort of day for the old man's coming home. Then it was evening, early evening, when all should go home by rights to rest and good food and cheerful voices and open doors—doors, flooded with sun which you took with you when you went in, yet left as much as they wanted for those outside; food, such as was being laid on the table behind; and a voice like his wife's as she murmured over her job. "Father'll think they forks right smart," he heard her say; and, "It's the bonniest china, I'm sure, I've seen for a while!" Between the setting of every two or three pots she asked for news of the trap. . . . "Likely they'll have got off afore their time."

"Nay, Marget'll watch out for that!" Thomas scoffed. "It's a deal more like to be the other way about. She was fair wild when she heard he meant coming to us, though I don't see how she could ha' looked for owt else. What, he was born here, to start wi', and never stirred off the spot; and then, when his father give up, he took hold for himself. I'm sure it's like enough he should want to come back."

"He's bound to hanker to be back on the marsh," she agreed, admiring the plated teapot with an absent air. . . . "It was real kind of Aunt Martha Bainbridge to give us yon. . . ."

"Ay, he's hankered right enough!" Thomas said, with so much bitterness in his voice that it startled even himself. Agnes came out of her meditation with a jerk, and the little cloud settled again on her face. She looked anxiously at her husband's back, which seemed to have taken on the sudden harshness of his mood. "'Tisn't as if Marget had wanted him, neither," he went on, in a sort of burst. "She's no call to make a to-do because she's going to be quit of him at last. She took him because she couldn't for shame do owt else, and a bonny time he's had wi' her and her ways! What, it's been the talk o' the country-side, the life she's led the poor old chap! Coming away from her'll be like coming out o' hell. Ay, she's been bad to him, has Marget—she has that! She never let him play his fiddle or owt, and give him the back of her tongue from morn to night. Such a rare hand as he used to be wi' the fiddle an' all! There's folks still ax after Fiddlin' Kit."

"Ay, well, poor old body, he'll get nobody's tongue here; and he can have his precious fiddle to bed and board. He can play till all's black if he likes, and owt he likes—fiddle or toothcomb or big brass pan!"

"That's right," Thomas nodded. "That's a good lass," but she turned away almost brusquely and without a smile. "We mun do our best

for the old folks, I'm sure," she went on. "One o' these days we'll want seeing to ourselves." She began to move about the table again, but with downcast eyes. "I'm rarely glad to have him, and that's the truth."

"Ay, an' he's suited as sheep in a turmut-field to come! Fair blubbered he did, the poor old chap, when it was fixed. I reekon he'd near give up hoping it would ever come off. Told me he couldn't sleep for thinking on't, he did that!"

Tears came into his wife's eyes, so that the pots in front of her melted into a shining blur. "Ay, well, he'll sleep right enough to-night, I'll take my oath! I've made him a grand bed, wi' a piller as soft as soft, and a bit of a rug alongside for his poor feet. Rarely snod an' heartsome the room looks, to be sure. You'd best slip up and take a peep for yourself."

He cast a glance at the new white-faced clock, which the uncertain old grandfather was trying to talk down. "Happen I'll have a look after I've gitten back. I'll likely miss the trap if I gang now. Any road, mind and see you hap him up warm. He's shivered many a time at Marget's, I'll be bound!"

"There's plenty blankets on the bed, and I've put him yon quilt as we bought at Wilson's sale. It's as good a quilt as ever I see. I mind

Maggie Wilson making it herself. As for t' blankets, they're the best there is in t'house."

"Ay, ay," Thomas nodded, "hap him up. Give him the best we've got, and you'll not be wrong."

"I'd think shame o' myself to give a visitor owt else." There was a stress in her voice that made him turn his head, but she was going away from him into the scullery and he could not see her face. Her last words, however, were flung back with the crisp cheerfulness to which he was used. "I'll be getting they scones buttered while you're off. . . . Now don't be mooning about and miss your time!"

She disappeared through the open door, and he was left to his vigil over the marsh. His mind, released from the tie of another in the room, began slowly and toilsomely to go back over old events. Once he sighed sharply, as if oppressed, but it was simply with extraordinary relief. He knew now, from his sudden sense of mental ease, how he had worried and fretted about the old dad. It was as if something he had ignored had been tugging at his coat, and now he could look behind him without fear of what he might see. He was free, or thought himself free, of that troubling episode at hi back . . . yet wondered ever so vaguely why there should still be a sore place at his heart.

It was not as if he regretted anything he had done, or that he would not have been ready to do that particular thing again. There had been only one way for him, and he had taken it, and if it had happened a thousand times he would have taken it still, but nevertheless it had left him with a latent fear of life, a darkening sense of indebtedness to fate. Even now, with the whole business right at last, and the road clear as the stars before his feet, he suffered a faint oppression of the mind. He supposed he would always have a bitter memory of the breaking up of the old home. Even an outsider must have felt it to some extent, an outsider who had had nothing to do with the cause. The old man had taken it so hard and yet with scarcely a word, so painfully like a hurt but yielding child; and he himself had done nothing but stand by, because just at that time he had not been able to help. . . . When he came to that word "able," it somehow stuck in his throat. . . . Anyhow, able or no, he had not helped, that was sure; and so the old man and the home had had to go. . . .

That was after his mother's death, of course, and after his eldest brother's death, too; not that matters had ever been very grand at Beautiful End. Kit had never been a practical man at any time of his life, had never known

the substance from the shadow or the business from the dream. He would be off playing his fiddle while crops waited and stock starved. Not but what he had played it rarely—everybody admitted that. There was not one of his sons but was proud of his gift, however awkward the moment of demonstration and the certainty of its cost. Even among themselves they allowed no criticism of his method of life, and certainly they never allowed it from anybody else. They had the strong filial feeling natural to their breed, and, added to that, a vague sense of something helpless and wonderful entrusted to their care. Lacking the gift on their own account, they yet shared an artistic strain which bade them pay tribute to the glamour, and worship, if they could not follow, the gleam. They had no quarrel with music if there was also daily bread. It was only that farming and suchlike didn't agree.

Perhaps things might have been better if Kit had gone to a new spot instead of following his father on the farm where he was bred. For once, in the shock of change, he might have seen both place and life in a practical light, and begun, at least, on normal, practical lines. But on the marsh, where he had dreamed as a lad, and which he had never left, he had never had even the vestige of a chance. For him it

was saturated with wonderment, tuned to the first magic of his fiddle, set in the light that never was on sea or land. It was impossible for him to reduce his particular enchantment to sound commercial terms. The place wasn't even real to him in the sense that it was real to others. It was the land of faery, and he had never come out of that land until—well, if the truth were known, he had never really come out. Spiritually, he had gone on living as he had lived as a youth. Life had not altered for him even when he succeeded to the farm, except that the rent which had stood in his father's name now stood in his own.

Not that Thomas, brooding as he watched, worked things out for himself like this. He only said to himself that his father, when he was young, might have done better with a bit of stirring up. It was right enough for a man to come back to his own place, as he himself had done, but it did him no harm to have a look at other methods first. Rooted and grooved in a spot, he might never grow up, and so throw the whole chain of existence out of gear. This bother, for instance, of the last few years—why, it should never have been allowed to happen at all. If Kit could have framed a little better at his job . . . if he could have hung on a bit longer . . . made a little brass . . . but

where was the use of thinking about that now ? Farther than this little mental growl, Thomas neither argued nor blamed. He accepted his father and his doings as he had accepted them all his life, and traced the shadow that lay on the evening's joy no further than himself.

The three sons had been dark, silent men, caring for little beyond their work and the ordinary pastimes of their class. They had been cradled in music, but, as Thomas said, its only expression through them was in their heels. They were all good dancers, and had been known as such far and near, appearing at every gathering with their serious faces and light feet. They were wrestlers as well, though here Bob was easily first, just as in the dancing Thomas was easily first. John might have been better than either, but he had not tried or not cared. Both the younger sons had gone out to service as lads, while John stayed to help his father at home. John had never married, never gone away to stay, never moved one day out of the groove into which he had been born. He had worked hard, but without zest, and in his work had kept to the old ways, instead of moving with the times. It was almost as if he had known his life would end at thirty-eight, and so the travail of progress had not seemed to him worth while. He never talked of the future as the

others did when they met, even unlucky Bob, with all the weights he had made such haste to fasten about his neck. Thomas remembered him moving alone about the level fields, a melancholy figure in spite of his youth and strength. He had been most at home with the stock, friends, whose lives, like his own, were ruled from without and had but a little day. But as long as he lived he had kept things going on the farm, just as his mother had kept things going in the house. And then, just over two years ago, the pair of them had died within a month; he, of a slipping ladder on a stack; she, in the new-established order of change. Shortly after had come the final change of all, when the living had followed the dead from out the house.

John had been only a negative sort of success, but Bob had been a failure all along the line. He had not liked his first situation from the start, and it was not long before the situation ceased to care about him. He had taken to changing places very soon, and, as is usually the case, the changes were mostly towards a lower grade. Marriage had anchored him, after a fashion, but at the same time it had finished his chance of ever rising higher. He now lived in the village across the marsh, acting as odd-job man to a cattle dealer in the place. His

cottage was an abode of tempest and wrath, slatternly beyond belief, full of crawling and screaming children and the loud alarums of a nagging woman's voice. It was easy to see where Bob would probably end, with a public-house almost cheek by jowl with his own. And yet, as Agnes had just said, he had been a smart enough lad. . . .

Thomas, indeed, was the only one who had made out, unless John's translation from a work-aday world might be counted a higher achievement still. At his first hiring he had found for himself a rare good spot, and had stayed there solidly all through. Bob's flights of fancy in the way of new jobs did not appeal to his farther-seeing mind ; never, indeed, stirred him to anything but a sort of wondering contempt. He knew what he wanted, and, once set upon the course that led to it direct, could not be forced from it or lured aside. He had his settled programme of life long before it came anywhere within his reach. He would save enough brass to start comfortably on his own ; he would take a farm on the marsh, and he would marry Agnes Black. But he was thirty-five before any of these things came to pass.

Yet, up to the last few years, he had had no doubt about them at all. They would follow, he thought, as naturally as harvest followed

seed-time or summer fulfilled spring. Nature's checks to the plans of man had, as a rule, some form of logic at their back, and were generally rectified in Nature's time. Checks in his own scheme, if they came, would follow the same lines, and his practised country patience would be able to see them through. And then suddenly and with lasting amazement he discovered that life was not like that—that it was more complicated and subtle than Nature, more idiotic, incomprehensible and perverse. It threw things awry without purpose or natural law, wrecked, and did not renew, robbed, and did not repay. His way had been blocked, as if by logs piling terribly in a stream, and there had been nothing for it but to hack himself out.

Two years ago he had been just two years behind his plans. His savings were not yet quite full-grown, his wife was still to secure. Not but what things were more or less fixed between Agnes and himself, and had been, indeed, for long. It had been a kindly courting, too, with never a quarrel of any sort to break its charm, and scarcely a casual look or impatient word. Most certainly it had not resembled in any degree the cat-and-mouse exhibition presented by Marget and Bob. He had never imagined that they might slip apart until the thing was on the point of coming about, still

less ever dreamed that they might do so with the end of the road actually in sight. Nevertheless, when the changes had begun with a rush, the first of them had announced itself just here. Suddenly she had turned from him, half hesitating, it was true, but turning away from him, all the same. She was not certain, she said, that she could marry him, after all, and it was better to think now than on the other side of the ring. She had no reason to give except that she wasn't sure, and all his wrath and persuasion could not change her mind. He was free to leave her, she told him, if he thought it best, or welcome to wait for the puzzle to come right. He had chosen to wait, if the impossibility of doing anything else might be dignified by the name of choice. Sometimes it seemed to him that they had already waited too long, but he was unable to tear himself from his settled course. Months of bewildered argument and rage brought him no nearer the solution of the point. Perhaps, after all, they had not been suited, in spite of the pleasant years. Perhaps it was just that the sight of the end, which sent him pressing on, had startled her to a halt and a springing aside.

Thomas, for whom nothing had ever gone amiss, found it hard to believe that fate was really playing him false. His disgust, when the

truth was finally forced upon him, was that of a man seeing for the first time the other side of the shield. The trouble and dread of his threatened loss had all the freshness of first pain and dread. It seemed to him that, if he lost Agnes, everything else in his scheme of life might possibly go as well; and while he was passing through this uncertain time, trying hard to regain his old security of belief, the trouble at home threatened afresh the ground beneath his feet.

He had been fond of his mother, and was shaken by her loss, and he was hit, as well, by his brother's accident and death, yet neither calamity seemed for the moment to threaten either his future or his present way of life. Yet he must have known what would happen if his thoughts had not been entirely fixed elsewhere. Kit had muddled along for a while with the help of a hired man, and then one night he sent for his two remaining sons.

Standing there in the caressing sun, with achievement behind him and the crown of achievement before, Thomas looked back on the long walk in the rain, the dull sands and the grey and sodden marsh. Under the waning light and the veil of the wet they had looked all one, all an untouched waste, unclaimed of any but the sea. And to-night even the sea

seemed to refuse a thing so desolate and bare, leaving it lying as if accursed between heaving water and the richer land. The younger brother, tramping the dyked road, had come upon Bob, slouching slowly ahead, a dreary figure still drearier than the day. The farm, when it stood up to them on the flat, looked lonely and helpless beyond words, a lost and futile thing of no account. They could have sworn that it was empty and that no one moved in the rooms, either human or ghost; that neither chair nor bed nor old press held a trace of souls that were gone. Only those who loved it would not mock at its name to-night. But as they came nearer by degrees, and its blank face took something of meaning and shape, they heard the thin voice of a violin.

They had stopped, he and Bob, by the meadow-gate, and listened awhile to the trembling sweetness charming the sad marsh. It had seemed the smallest thing in the world between the vastness of earth and sky, and perhaps also the bravest thing in the world as well. They had forgotten for a moment how the rain was beating over the fence. They had forgotten the untended fields and neglected home. They had even forgotten the probable errand on which they were bent, the oppression of which had clogged their feet as they came.

They remembered together little things out of the past . . . . a wooden cradle with carved sides . . . apples in the orchard . . . long paddles on warm sands . . . skating . . . the red light of a hearth . . . an aproned form with a face that was always looking out, set for them at every window, watching for them at each door. Every picture they saw was bathed in sun or fire, because the notes of the fiddle were touching it with gold. Thomas forgot while he listened that life was twisting itself into knots in his helpless hands. Out there, while the fiddle spoke, Agnes still loved him and had never looked aside. And perhaps Bob, too, found an old dream waiting on the desolate road.

The life of the house seemed to sink when the fiddle stopped, and as they came towards it across the field with heavy, squelching steps, it had the effect of retreating instead of drawing near. Even when the door opened at the click of the garden gate, showing their father's figure in the square, the impression was that of a shadow opening in a shadow's face. They had gone in silently, their mood gentled by that singing voice over the marsh, and the door closing behind them had shut out the rain but nothing else. The dusk and sadness claiming both land and sea were all through the lost farmhouse as well.

The three of them sat in the kitchen without fire or light, and the younger men said nothing while the old man put his case. They stared at him dumbly in the dusky place, seeing little through the gloom but the silver of hair and whisker round his head, and hearing his voice, when they looked away, as if it came from nobody at all, the vibrating old voice that had mostly been used for greeting and song and seemed to have borrowed a sweetness from the violin. There were only the three of them in the shadowed room, but it always seemed possible that there might be more. Sometimes, indeed, Thomas forgot that John was no longer there, and strained his eyes towards the corners to make sure. He had always been so still and rare of speech that death did not seem to have taken him away. Afterwards, it seemed to Thomas that many had sat in judgment on the case, for shame can multiply a face or two into a crowd. The wettest moon he had ever seen had suddenly appeared at a pane, like a stranger walking and staring round the house; and where the waves were breaking below the farmyard wall was the dismal wash of a rain-whipped, lifeless tide.

Old Christopher Sill had not beaten about the bush; indeed, he was disconcertingly direct. He told them quite simply that he had had

notice to quit, making no attempt at either excuse or complaint. Both, of course, had guessed that the end was getting near, but it came as a shock when finally declared. The thing was common enough, indeed, in such lives as theirs, but it had not happened to the Sills for more than a hundred years. They had just gone on, father and son, until they chanced to come to Kit, and, if John had lived, he might very possibly have gone on, too. They had often wondered, Thomas and Bob, why he had never pressed his father to resign, but they guessed at the double reason now. John's feet had long been set on a different road, and the money behind the farm had been dwindling every year. Money vanished with Kit as the notes of his fiddle fluted out to sea, and he troubled as little about it as about the music-gold that he could so easily recreate. The steady down-grade on which he had lived had not been able to push the lesson home. It had never seemed possible that he could leave the farm, and the bare formality of a notice to quit could not make it possible now. Surely there could be nothing more right than that a man should spend his last breath where he was born, and especially one of the rooted, marsh-bred Sills? He only asked for a year or two at the end of all that had gone; couldn't Thomas and Bob

see that he had that ? A year or two, happen —and happen not so much. He wouldn't be long at his dying, he felt sure.

" But ye've gitten your notice," Bob observed, staring at the floor, and Thomas had looked out of the window at the sky. Neither needed telling what was coming next, and each was getting ready to meet it in his way. . . . All those generations of Sills had kept Kit on the place long after a less tie-bound landlord would have turned him out, and they gave him a further chance of rescue now. The Squire was willing to let the farm to one of the lads, provided he could show a reasonable guarantee. " Then happen you'd let me bide wi' ye till I was finished," Kit said at the end. " I partly what think it wouldn't be so long."

Even in the dusk, and doggedly turned away, they had been conscious of his eyes, moving enquiringly from face to face. Both of them, staring either at the sky or at the floor, saw equally the gleam of the white head turning and pausing and always turning again. In the house, in spite of its dumb ghosts, there was still the strange emptiness that stays so long after a death, as if out of a full cup some portion has been spilled. The silence enfolding the brothers seemed to beg to speak for itself, to deplore and refuse the harsh necessity of words. But still

the old man's eyes travelled and begged; and at last the slack-shouldered elder moved his head in a dreary shake.

"I'm no use to you that way, Father, I doubt," Bob said. "What this place wants is brass, and I've none o' that at my back. It takes me all my time and more to shift along as it is, as folks in plenty'll tell you if you ax. It's no manner o' use my thinking o' the farm."

There was a second pause after that, and with it a sense in the air that the question had passed on, but nobody answered it except by that silence which resisted and refused. Then Bob spoke again, with a sort of half-shamed urging in his tone. "The lad here mun ha' saved a bit by now. Happen Thomas could see to help you out."

Undoubtedly Thomas had seemed the one to help—the youngest, the strongest, and the man who had the brass. It was well enough known that he had saved, had been careful and patient, anxious to lay by. They knew, too, that he meant to take a farm, and here was Beautiful End for the lifting of a hand. What could he possibly want that would be more likely than that? Bob, who could as well have taken the Hall itself as the little farm, envied his younger brother with all his heart. It was on Thomas the old man had relied, never on Bob; that was

perfectly clear to the one who had not made out. The asking of them together had been only a form, a polite concession to conservative family dues. Thomas was the right and proper person to respond; to put it plainly, he was the only one who could. But the claim on his help had come at the worst possible time, and his natural kindly instinct smothered in revolt.

"Not but I doubt Marget would never ha' come," Bob was drawling on in his tired voice. "There's over much work on a farm to suit her by a deal. I reckon she'd ha' thought it a dreary spot an' all. She's one as likes seeing folks go by, and a sight o' clattin' an' suchlike in the street. But the lad here isn't bothered wi' a missis just yet, nor like to be, as far as we know. There's nowt to keep him from throwing up his job. He's free to do as suits him, is Tom."

And still Thomas did not speak, ashamed of himself and yet holding himself hard. The aversion with which he had set out to meet this probable demand arose in him again in a fierce flood and all but forced him to his feet. It was a wet night, or he might never have come at all, but on an evening like this Agnes would be sure to be fast at home. There would be no chance of meeting her about the fields or lanes. He could never have brought himself to come so far, while the hope of her face was behind

each turn and hedge. . . . Yet here he was being asked to leave the spot for good—he, whose uncertainty could not stay one hour!

Suddenly he spoke, without preamble or excuse, long after the question seemed to have fainted away and died, ashamed. "I'm no use, neither," he heard himself saying at last, his voice sounding dull and cold over the wrath and shame within. He was still staring at the sky while he spoke. Failure may look at the floor because of the burden on its back, but success, when it makes its refusal, must look up. It was then that the moon slid round the corner, and drew nearer, and looked in. He felt a spasm of rage against it, as at another spectator of the ignoble scene.

"Ay, but you've the brass saved all right!" Bob exclaimed, twisting his head to get a glimpse of his brother's face. His discomfort at his own position in the affair seemed for the moment to be swallowed up in surprise. "Many's the time you've tellt me on't, I' sure, and how you meant taking a farm afore so long. I'd ha' thought this had fallen in for you just right."

"I'm not ready," Thomas said doggedly. "I mun have a bit more time. Happen another year I could see my way. . . ."

"A year's neither here nor there, surely, if yon's all?"

"It'd be two, happen—ay, and maybe more. I don't rightly know. I can't rightly say."

"Ay, well, it's now or never for the old dad," Bob said. "A year or two's no use to the old chap, wi' notice to quit pinned to his jacket-tail. What's gitten you, lad, to be hanging back like this?" He raised his voice and spoke more firmly, sure of his cause. "The spot'll suit you, waint it, come to that?"

"Ay, I'd like it right well."

"Well, then, whatever's to do?" Bob peered at him curiously, struck by the mixture of longing and dogged resistance in his tone. "If it's nobbut a matter of a pound or two, you can fetch up easy enough on yon. There's a deal o' folk'd lend you a hand, seeing how you're placed. It's more than time, too, you were starting on your own. It doesn't do to stop in service over long. You get kind o' fixed and feared o' striking out."

"I'll strike right enough, never you fret—I will that. But it'll be in my own time. . . ."

"You can't always suit things just to the tick. . . . Eh, I wish the chance had come my road, that's all!" Bob sighed and frowned, depressed by the thought of what he had missed, and the folly which refused what he would so gladly have seized. "But it's no use my thinking on't, so that's flat. Even if I could borrow

the brass, I'd never catch up with it, I doubt, and there's Marget to be suited in t'matter, as I said afore. Nay, I'm a broken reed, that's what it is, and I mun just let be. It's for you to say what you'll do for the old man."

"I can't do owt—yet," Thomas repeated. "I mun ha' time . . ." and pushed his chair further into the concealing gloom. He felt trapped in a cunning snare, all the more cunning and cruel because it was simply his own plan of life twisted and tangled out of shape. He had never dreamed that his future hung by a hair, but then he had never imagined that John might die, or that Agnes might so incredibly change her mind. He felt not only trapped but mocked, and the mockery hardened him in his resolve. Difficult as he was to turn, he might yet have been driven to yield, if the whole business had not worn so ironic a leer. The rough hand of fate was thrust in among his careful plans. His faithfulness and self-denial, his patience and hard work, were all to be shuffled and risked in a hurried moment like this.

If only things had been right between him and his lass, how triumphantly simple the whole problem would have been! It was true that he would have liked another year to look round, but he would have let that go without hesitation for the chance of the farm. The place was in a

bad state, of course, but that should mean an easier rental, and all the more credit to him when he pulled it round. He knew the little farm by stick and stone, and loved it well enough, too. He was content enough in his hired spot, but the marsh blood that was in him cried always to be settled within sight and sound of the sea. Even to-night, though his heart was pulling him back, and the marsh was a dripping waste with a trap at the farther end, he had drawn great breaths as the mountains dropped behind. To have had the old home with Agnes—why, it was better by far than he had planned! And in the event, as it had proved, how far it had fallen short!

He would have been glad, too, to keep the old man, just as the Agnes he had counted as his would also have been glad. Both had been bred to the sense of duty powerful in their class, and the fact that Kit had muddled his own chance would have made no difference to that duty in their eyes. He would have been welcome to their home as long as he lived, and indeed, there would have been no hardship about it, after all, for he was both lovable and kind, as well as the sort that made little trouble about the house. Thomas, in fact, would have been proud as well as glad to give him what he asked. He would have liked to have seen him daily

in his chair, playing his fiddle in a patch of shade or pottering about the garden in the sun. The old man had always been rarely fond of flowers, and no matter what happened or did not happen on the farm, the garden, at least, was always bright and sweet. Flowers seemed to grow for him, indeed, under the mere caressing glance of his eye. . . . But at present Agnes was turned the other way, and he would not travel a road that was not hers as well. As long as he could he would stay within reach, doggedly waiting and waiting for the recoil, and if anything else called for his help, he must shut his ears and let it go to the wall. A few miles over the hill would have made little difference, perhaps, but he could not have endured those miles, and he did not mean to try. Without Agnes, he would let the farm go without even raising his hand. Without Agnes, he would let his father go, too.

There being little else he could do for the old man, Bob was roused to fight for him to the last. It was his brother's duty, he pointed out, a duty that would have been a pleasure to other folks, not so far. Nobody could have had a better father, as they knew right well, and he was entitled to the little they could do. It wasn't as if Thomas hadn't the brass—what, he had more than once told them about it him-

self! If that was true—and it was like enough, after all these years—there could be nothing and less than nothing in the way. Supposing it did mean a year before he'd planned, why, surely to goodness there was no hitch in that? He'd never for shame let his father be turned out, like a come-day-go-day tenant that never meant to stop? He could have both bed and bite under his roof, Bob said, but it wouldn't be much to crack on, after Beautiful End. There was only one right road, as anybody could see, and that was to put in at once for the offered farm.

Kit never spoke or stirred while Bob argued and Thomas denied, the deep, slow voices rising a little towards the end, but never once growing bitter or unkind. Abuse and bickering had always been strangers under that roof, and even Thomas's sullen rage did not vent itself in speech. He spoke seldom, indeed, as seldom as he could, and then only dour refusals to consider the matter at all, retreating further and further out of the path of the moon. But throughout the whole scene Kit never said another word, and his sons did not think it strange. He was of the sort that makes its appeal and then stands aside, leaving others to argue and settle its fate. He had pleaded his case with a childlike certainty that somebody would step in, and

the matter was fought to an end without his help. Even when Thomas had said nay for the last time—the hundredth, miserable, degrading time, so it seemed—his father had not spoken again. Perhaps even then he hoped and had faith, that faith in chance which dreamers carry to their graves ; or perhaps he guessed the hold of the tie to which Thomas would give no name.

" Ay, well, happen you'll sleep on't," Bob had said, rising at last, and speaking even to the end as if his father were not there. " There's nowt else I can think on as'll likely change your mind, and I doubt I'd ha' been wiser not to say so much. But it's hard to stand by when you can't do nowt to help, and see as others as can all right but happen won't. There's a home for the old man at our house whenever he likes to come, and right welcome he'll be under any roof of mine. As for Marget, she'll likely kick a bit at first, but I'll get her round to it after a deal o' talk. She'll come to it all right, same as other folks have done, and it's queer if I can't give my father a share of my own spot."

" I'll lend a hand wi' the keep," Thomas muttered, out of the dark, and Bob nodded in answer, turning to the door. He knew well enough what his offer of a home was worth, among weakly, ill-tempered children and under a nagging shrew. He knew as well as Thomas or Kit that it would

only be a dismal waiting-place for death. It was bad enough to have to quit, to break ties and begin a feeble life again, to lose the sound of the tide awash at the sea-wall, but the worst to come was not the loss of the farm. It was Marget that was the dreadful thing to face, as they were all aware. It was the thought of Marget with the old man in her hands that almost defeated Thomas at the last. If only the poor old chap could have gone to somebody else! . . . "Now ye'll mind ye can come to us, Father!" Bob repeated on the step, and Kit had simply thanked him and said no more. In the porch, Thomas, dismal as the night, managed to drag out a few ungracious words. "As soon as I've gitten things straight, Father . . . just hold on. . . ." And Kit had said thank you quite simply for that, too.

Once outside he was seized by a passionate impulse to return. Grasping at one thing still out of reach, he was more than probably risking the loss of all. Supposing Agnes should never be won back, no matter what he offered or threw away? It was on the cards, as he was forced to admit. Even without her he would still have the farm, and his payment of satisfaction in his father's face. But, rough and unthinking as he was, he guessed that partial fulfilment was more to be dreaded than complete loss, that a

heart's desire is better rejected if it cannot be had whole. And indeed, this strife with himself was only a waste of energy, after all. He knew, as things stood, he would never come away.

The brothers found nothing more to say as they followed the muddy track to the meadow gate. Bob had tried his eloquence, such as it was, to a hopeless end, and his own position was doubtful, to say the least. At any moment Thomas might have turned, and with just cause. He was the youngest after all, and the only one that had stood on his own feet. John had not had enough courage even to live, and Bob, beaten and slack, was scarcely the one to preach burdens on to another's back. He was tired, too, after a wearing day and a scream-riddled night; busy, moreover, with the problem of facing Marget with the news.

At the back of his mind was a vague idea that Thomas's wooing was somehow going amiss. He had thought of it while he argued in the house, but Thomas had never thought fit to mention the lass, and it wasn't his brother's place to bring her in. The courting, he knew, had been a long one, like his own. He could have told Thomas a thing or two, he felt sure, only telling these things was never any use. In spite of his good sense and superior luck, Thomas must dree his weird like the rest.

They had parted where the roads parted on the marsh, and after them through the lifting curtain of the rain had looked the pale wraith that wanted to be the moon. And again, over their heads from the lone farm, now slipped away into the unbordered dark, there trembled the long flight of the violin.

Alone on the marsh, Thomas had once again nearly repented and turned back. It was not that the fiddle seemed to call him back. It had, on the contrary, the effect of shutting him out. It seemed to mark the final detachment of father from son, to emphasise the division of two who by rights should have held together, but were nevertheless going to drift apart. It was Kit's swan-song to his own place, and as such it kept its ecstasy for himself and its poignancy for the listener on the waste. Thomas had an idea that he was hurrying back to the farm, plodding again through the meadow along the rutted track. He heard the little click of the garden gate, saw himself pushing gently at the door, met the sweet flood of music rushing out, and warmed to the old man's welcome and relief. But always his feet were taking him away, and the pull of the farm and its trouble lessened with every mile. Now his thoughts reached forward rather than behind, fixed on a dweller in another house. In his mind he saw her home

between gentle curves of the land, the night brooding over its walls that seemed as much grown out of the earth as the hedgerows in the fields. He saw the syringa over the poreh lifting its star-faces to the moon. He saw faint candle-light in a room upstairs, and herself a moving shadow across the blind. . . .

He was late at his own place, and found himself loeked out, but even as he tried the door he heard stumbling on the stairs, and knew that his step had warned the folk across the yard. While he waited he said to himself that if there was any bother he would give in his notice right away. It only wanted some little thing like that to fix his mind. He tried to work himself into a fiercer mood, ready to lash out at the first suggestion of rebuke. It would be grand to be his own master after so long, instead of a hired man at beck and eall. With a word he could alter the position when he liked. But when the bolts were unshot the farmer said nothing except that it was a dirty night, and Thomas took off his boots in silenee and followed him upstairs. In the morning the porridge was badly burnt, and again he tried to drive himself to a break, but onee again something put him off and he kept still. That evening, however, he met Agnes in the lane between the farm and

her home, and the thing rose in him with a rush and he spoke out.

"You can take it or leave it, as suits you," he said, "but there it be to your hand. The farm's ready and waiting on you, and so's the man. I've had enough o' your putting off and keeping me hanging round. You've got to fix it up now or let me gang."

"You must give me time," she answered, using his own words of the night before. "I'm not ready—I don't know my mind. As for keeping you hanging round, you've been free to go this many a long day, as you know right well. I'm not that anxious to get wed, not I. But if it's me you're wanting, as you seem to think, well, there's nothing for it but to give me time."

"You've had time and plenty, I'm sure!" he retorted with rough scorn. "Time to look round at all the lads and begin again. Time to look round at the married folk an' all, and see who's suited and who baint. But there's got to be an end of your daft shilly-shally now. Seems to me you think it's nobbut a game."

"Nay, then, that's just what I don't!" she flashed back in wrath. "It's because I take it so serious-like that I don't mean to be pushed. There's times it seems to me that serious I don't know how folk ever come to it at all. 'Tisn't

as if it was just a bit of a bargain over a cow or a two-three sheep. It's you and me beginning our lives right over again from the start, and maybe both on us finding we're different folk from what we thought. I'm suited well enough as I am, and I'd be a fool not to stop and think. I'll not wed till I'm that set on the lad I'll find myself fair running to kirk, and I'm a long way off yet from being as nicked in the head as yon! I don't say but what I think a deal of you, because I do. I'm not breaking my heart over you, that's all. If you want to gang, you can gang, ay, and right off the reel, but I won't stir finger or foot until I choose!"

"Ay, but there's the old man, I tell ye!" Thomas had blurted out. "I'm in a cleft stick, seemingly, atween you and him. They'll turn him out of his spot if I waint promise to take hold."

"Eh, now, if that isn't terble hard!" She fell silent, thinking after her passionate speech, studying his lowering, fretted face, and seeing all in a moment how they stood. "But there's never two minds about it, surely?" she added, in a troubled voice. "You'll have to see to your father one way or t'other, you and Bob. And you'll never to goodness miss the chance o' the farm?"

He turned his eyes on her with their dogged, miserable look.

" Ay, but I will, if I can't have you an' all."

" You've had your answer to that till I'm fair tired." She turned away from him, staring vexedly at the hedge.

" Ay, well, then, that's all there is to it, I reckon. Father and farm'll have to see to themselves."

" You can have a housekeeper to do for you," Agnes said.

" An' a bonny makeshift an' all, for a man as wants a wife ! "

" Other folks do with them all right."

" Well, I want nowt wi' 'em, so that's flat."

" But you'll have to do summat o' the sort," she protested angrily, troubled and also afraid. Her own particular cleft stick was becoming plainer with every minute that passed. " You'll have to have somebody about the place, and it's fair wicked to talk o' missing the farm. What, you've been wanting a spot of your own for long enough, I'm sure, and now you can do what's right by your dad at the same time."

" You wouldn't ha' minded him about the house ? If things was fixed, I'm meaning . . . if we were wed. . . ."

" Mind an old body settin' on the hearth ? " She turned to face him again with wonder in

her eyes. "Nay, but you know me better than that by a deal! I'd ha' been glad enough to see to him, that I would. I've always been rarely fond o' Fiddlin' Kit."

"Ay, well, then," Thomas insisted, "what's in the road?"

"I've tell't you what's in the road. I can't frame to make up my mind."

"Seems to me it's an easy enough job," he answered her gloomily, staring at his feet, and she laughed in spite of her anger and dismay.

"Happen it is for some folk, but not me. . . . Hark ye! Show a bit o' sense, do now," she coaxed. "You go off to your farm, and likely I'll throw my shoe after you, even yet. I reckon you'll ha' forgot all about me, by then."

"'Tisn't me as'll do the forgetting!" he turned on her fiercely, breaking out at last. "It's your sort, not mine, as doesn't keep a friend in mind. It's your sort as goes back on your word, and plays fast and loose and suchlike tricks. You'd be glad to be shot of me, I'll be bound, and afore long there'd be somebody easier in my shoes, but I don't mean to give you a chance o' forgetting, don't you fret! Am I like to put miles between us when I'm lile or nowt to you in the same lane? Nay, I'll bide . . . I'll bide. . . . I'm used to your ways, and though I don't think much on 'em, I reckon I can see it through.

But it isn't only me as is waiting on you now. You're making me act bad to the old dad, and that's what's putting me about."

"It's no business of mine, I tell you!" she flung back, full of resentment at this shifting of loads. "It's nowt to do wi' me, anyway round." They stood glaring at each other with frowning faces and hard eyes, blaming each other for the subtle net by which they were equally entrapped. "I've no call to wed just to give your father a home," she went on. "I'm sorry for him, as I said, and I'd lend a hand if I could, but I don't see as it's fair to blame me because I can't. You've not overmuch pride, I doubt, or you'd never put it like yon. It's nobbut a poor sort o' lad as'd take me at the price!"

He threw her a final look of helpless rage, and swung away from her, facing towards the farm. "Then he mun gang to Marget," he flung over his shoulder, "Marget and Bob!" and at the terrible name of Marget she cried aloud. Thomas continued steadily on his way.

"Eh, Thomas, you don't mean that!" she called after his retreating back. "She'll be bad to him, will Marget—she'll finish him right off. Bide a bit, can't you? . . . Save us, man, can't you bide? I never somehow thought of the old man going there."

"Where else should he gang?" he demanded

sullenly, stopping but still turned away. "Bob's his own flesh and blood as well as me, and a long sight the oldest on us an' all. There's t' Union, likely, might do for the old dad, but I doubt they won't take him while there's others to fill the job."

"Nay, and why should it, I'd like to know!" she exclaimed. "You should think shame o' yourself for suchlike selfish talk." There was something desperate in her glance at the hedge on either side, as if the fences were hung with the net that would not let her through. From them she looked once more at Thomas, turning slowly on his heel, and slowly beginning at last to see his way. . . . "I'd wed him myself and work for him sooner than that!"

"I reckon there's nowt agen you wedding me instead."

"Nay, then, I can't. . . . I've tell't you. . . . I just can't."

"Then he'll be at Marget's afore you can say knife."

They had changed places at last, as was clear to both; in the course of a few moments they had changed. At last he had found a way of blocking her escape, of putting a log in the path of her everlasting no. It was he who had the better hold now, and he did not mean to be stopped from winning the fall. He knew well

enough that however hard she might be with a young man foolishly in love, she had the softest heart in the world for the weak and old. Perhaps he had no pride, as she said, but he meant to use his father's cause to the full for the furthering of his own. He stood staring fixedly at her downcast head, and the old kindliness came back into his voice now that he saw his advantage clear. He put the whole case over to her again, but always with Marget looming largely at the end, and had the same satisfaction in the last effect. Agnes knew Bob's wife as well as anybody else, and needed no enlightening as to her ways. His hopes rose and his face cleared as he saw the position he had cursed proving the door to his desire, and as his heart eased he became more eloquent, more tender, more difficult to resist. At the finish he gave her a rough picture of the lonely farm, and the fiddle singing into the night. . . .

She yielded at last with wet eyes and a dismal shake of her drooped head.

"Nay, then, we mun just put a stop to it, that's all. We can't let him gang to Marget, poor old chap! If you waint stir without me, I mun wed you and take the risk, but I doubt we'll make a mess o' things, you an' me. It's nobbut a middlin' sort of a bargain when folks don't both jump on the tick." She looked up

at him suddenly with a laugh that was more than half a wail. "Eh, Thomas, but baint there some other lass'd do as well?"

And then, when he had what he wanted, he put it from him and turned away. As soon as the battle was over, he saw at once the futility of his success. He could think, now that he was no longer vexed and opposed, and thinking, could find nothing else to do but draw back. His father could have only a few years in front of him, after all, but this was for all his own life and hers. He had his pride, in spite of her taunt, and this was apparently where it stopped. It was a poor bargain, as she had said, appealing angrily to his common sense; a gift, if you could call it a gift, that wouldn't be even his own. And it wasn't much of a man who bullied a woman into saying yes, who needed so mighty a lever to get at her heart. He stood back once again as she wept, and heard his voice sending her away, heard himself seal his father into the mercy of Bob's wife. . . .

So Kit had gone to Marget's, trustful to the end, even with his sold-up house behind him and a shrewish face before. Thomas attended the sale and bought in a few trifles at the old man's wish, and when all was over he borrowed a trap and drove him away. Kit was cheerful and talkative throughout the drive, and they

never so much as mentioned Marget's name. Thomas had an insane idea that they would find his mother at the farther end, and kept seeing her waiting for them at the door. He never forgot the journey's real end, the shut house full of eyes at every pane, the cold wait in the empty street, the colder opening to let them in. Marget had met them with silence at first, and then with a gathering flood of angry speech. Kit's attempt at grateful thanks had been swallowed up in it as the channels out on the sands were swallowed by the winter wave. Thomas waited until Marget's breath gave out, and then went away, feeling as though he had thrown a live thing to a cat. After that time he had gone as seldom as his sense of duty would allow. He never failed, however, to pay his share, and he managed to get news of the old man from Bob. Not that Bob ever had a very great deal to say, because he kept out of the house as much as he could. The old man was "ailing a bit," or "right enough," as the case might be, but that was all. Now it was nearly two years since Kit had gone to the unhappy place—the place where a pair of lovers had prisoned him in.

. . . . .

Agnes, returning, found him at the mirror again, so intent that he started when she spoke.

"Land's sake! Why, you're not off yet! . . . What's come to you to be gaping in yon glass?" She stared at him wonderingly, and he turned a somewhat sheepish face. "You nobbut look at it once a week, as a rule, and that's when you're donning yourself for kirk."

"I was nobbut taking a squint at the room," he answered in a puzzled tone. "Glass makes it look different, I don't know why."

"Ay, I'll be bound it's different!" she exclaimed with pride. "I'd a sight on't once, not long afore the sale, and a lost-looking, dismal spot it was, to be sure! Seems like as if it couldn't possibly be the same. What wi' new furniture and range and wall-papers an' suchlike, it's for all the world like some other place."

"Ay, but I wasn't meaning it like that. Seems as if it was the *old* room I can see in t'glass. It was the old kitchen glass, you'll think on, as I bought at the sale. Father didn't want it going to off-comers and suchlike, so I bought it to please the poor old chap. He'd a sort of idea as glasses knew a deal—said there was glasses remembered things they'd seen. Likely this here has got the old kitchen on its mind. Likely it's looked that often at the old, it can't frame yet to take a peep at the new."

"Likely you're blinded wi' the sun!" She flung him a look of laughing scorn and went to

the window again. . . . "What in the name o' goodness can ha' come to yon trap! D'you think owt's gone amiss on the road?"

"More like they've been late in setting off, as I said afore. I'll be bound Marget's found summat to keep 'em back, if it's only to put the poor old man about. Or likely they've been bothered wi' folk stopping 'em on t'road. They'll all be agog on the marsh to think as he's coming home."

"Folks say they're glad the Sills isn't quitting the marsh," Agnes said. "They thought nowt o' the man as come here after your dad. He seems to have been only a terble middlin' sort—over fond o' the drink and happen a bit daft. The place isn't over lucky, Thomas, I doubt!"

"Folks make their own luck," Thomas said doggedly, squaring his jaw, "and anyway round it's brought me all the luck I want. There's you here, as I never thought'd come, and brass enough to put the farm on its legs. And now there's the old man coming home to-night. I reckon I'm suited as well as most. There's nobbut one thing grubs me," he went on, with a moody look, "and that's that the old chap ever had to gang."

"Eh, let it bide, can't you?" Agnes cried aloud. She stole a glance at his face and her own drooped again. "Surely to goodness you've

never been going over yon? Things is right enough now—as right as rain."

"Ay, but they're spoilt a bit for us, all the same." His voice had dropped back into the bitter tone. "I still feel sort o' shamed about the job, and I reckon you're none so bright about it yourself. And yet, if it come back over again, I'd do same as afore."

"I don't see as we could ha' done different," Agnes said, and sighed. "I did say as I'd come if you couldn't fix nowt else, but I doubt we wouldn't ha' made much out in the end."

"It'd ha' been hell for both on us afore so long." He began to walk restlessly up and down behind her back, the old angry resentment blurring and troubling his face. "What beats me about it all is what come over you just then. You'd been right enough afore, and you're suited well enough now. What, for the land's sake made you act so strange?"

"Nay, I don't know, I'm sure. I'm fair puzzled about it myself." She laughed, but there were regretful tears behind the laugh. "Seems to me women don't always know exactly what they're at. Folks don't always see their road clear in front o' their feet. There's a time for everything, I reckon, that's what it is, and it hadn't come just then for you and me."

"Anyway, it's come now, thanks be!" he

said in a sudden burst, and he stopped his angry pacing and came to her side. "But all the same," he persisted, "I'd ha' liked it perfect all through. There's things as hurt to look back on more than a deal. There's times I've heard her rating the poor old chap, I've felt that bad I could ha' shot myself right out. 'Twas summat like as if he'd been clapped in jail; as if you an' me had gone and put him in quod."

She put her hands on his shoulders, her eyes filling with tears.

"Nay, now—don't—don't! You make me feel that bad."

"And him so kind," he went on, as if unable to stop. "Ay, it makes you feel bad enough to swear."

"It's over . . . it's by wi' . . . we'll make it up to him, you'll see!" He put his arms about her, and her hands went up around his neck. "You'll not be keeping a grudge agen me all our lives?"

"Nay, it's myself I'm sore with, not you. I should ha' done my duty by the old chap, and trusted you'd come to me in the end. But I wasn't for taking the risk. I was over feared. And now I doubt I'll always feel sort o' shamed."

"Things'll sort themselves out, don't you fret. They'll right themselves sure as a bobbin, after a bit."

"Likely they will."

"It'll make a sight o' difference, once he's back. You'll never think twice o' yon weary time no more."

"Likely I waint."

"And you'll not throw it up at me when you're mad?" she begged. "You'll not forget just how it come about?"

"I tell you I blame myself," he repeated, "and nobody else. Happen I wanted you that bad I'd to pay a bigger price than most. Or happen we were both on us driven, and couldn't help ourselves at all. But like enough it'll all come right, as you say, and it's nobbut fools as frets themselves, looking back."

"We've come out a deal better than we deserve!" She smiled and drew away from him, looking happy again. "We took a deal o' risk, you an' me, but we've bit on our feet, I reckon, after all. . . ." She drifted back to the table, as to an altar on which their sacrifice of thanksgiving was set. "What can ha' come to the trap, Thomas? Father'll be wearied out afore they land. . . . I mind you said he liked a bit o' ham to his tea. You said Marget wasn't for giving him ham if she could help."

"She'd ha' given him nowt," Thomas growled, "if it wasn't she was feared o' finishing him off. Brass she was getting for him was over good to

lose. He never eat what I give her, I'll be bound. . . . Ay, he'd always a fancy-like for ham, and when he'd finished he'd gang outside for his smoke. There's a new pipe I bought him, somewheres. Marget took t'other off him, Bob said. . . . Ay, an' there's some of his pet bacca in a tin."

"Have you finished yon seat you were making for him under t'hedge?"

"Ay, it's finished right enough. A gradely seat it is an' all—a sight better than t'other as used to be by t'door. If you'll stop fidging over yon table you might take a look for yourself."

She laughed and went out with him into the porch. Their figures divided the sun as they stood, so that they looked like swimmers deep in the streaming gold. Their heads leaned together as they nodded approval at the seat, a wooden bench in the arms of a well-laid fence. It was a grand seat, Agnes said, and a grand evening for anybody wanting to sit out. They pictured the old man sitting there, warming himself in the last of the sun. They were excited and full of plans again, like children preparing for a treat. She had her hand on his arm, peering across him round the porch, when the trap suddenly lumbered into sight. It might have been dumped out of space on the straight-ruled road, a languid object jolting over the flat.

Thomas, meditating proudly upon the seat, turned about to a hasty prod.

"There it be, Thomas—there it be! Trap, I mean, man—look ye—can't ye see? Be off now as smart as you can. They'll be here afore you've made shift to start."

She tried to push him out of the porch, deaf to his protest that the trap had a fairish piece to cover yet. "A bonny time it'll take an' all," he added, "wi' yon bag o' bones atween the shafts. Seems like it meant liggin' down for a bit of a nap."

"Best be soon than late," she urged. "Nay, now, be off, do!"—and he allowed himself to be shoved on to the path, grinning at her eager face. "I'll have kettle singing by you're back," she went on, "and then there'll be nowt to keep us from setting to, right off. Bob'll have a bite o' summat, likely, afore he makes off. Eh, but I'm right fain to see the old man's face when he passes t'door."

"He'll find summat better than Marget to look at, and that's sure!" he teased her, lingering, and she stamped her foot at him and cried:

"Get on, you gert soft!"

And he answered, "I *is* getting on!" and stood like a stock.

The farm, full of the evening sun, and with smiling figures at its door, made a gay enough

welcome for the exile that was drawing towards it over the marsh. Thomas received a final wave of mingled speeding and threat, and then the blue gown vanished through the porch. "We mun do what we can," he heard her call from within, "but if we don't suit him better than Marget, I'll shut up house!"

Then he was gone at last, his broad figure dwindling as he went, until the high hedges hid him and the wild roses closed above his head. Away on the road, coming to meet him, the trundling speck grew and grew in size. As he dwindled and disappeared, so it enlarged and sharpened into sight. There was something fateful, indeed, about its slow yet determined approach. One knew, without dreaming of asking, that its errand was for the farm. In spite of its slow and clumsy advance it reminded Agnes of a sailing-boat she had seen, coming on high water across the glancing bay. It had seemed to come straight from the village under the hill to the farm that stood alone on the edge of the sand. Wind and tide were both at its back, driving it on a flowing path that seemed to have no possible end except in the house itself. She had watched it from that upstairs room upon which she had been at work so long, and had seen it heaving towards her, purposeful and direct. As it drew nearer the shore without

slackening its speed, she began to feel almost afraid. The tilted bowsprit seemed ruled to the last inch on the window of the room. It was like a racer, nearing the post, leaping ahead along the last stretch. It was like a child, hurrying to be home, heedless of any obstacle in the way. She could not see the man in charge for the sail, so that the boat seemed like a thing by itself, a toy launched by the impetus of some mighty hand. She felt certain it meant to try to sail to her in the room, and would dash itself on the sea-wall just below. There was even a moment when she leaned from the window to scream, because it looked as though nothing could stop it now it was so near. And then, just as it seemed that the bow was over the hedge, it had swung on its heel and forgotten and gone away. . . . Like swinging a reel on a thread, she thought to herself; as easy as turning the handle of a door. Now it was leaning over, beating into the wind, and she could see a figure in the sheets. Quickly, though more slowly than it had come, it went away, fretting and fuming where it had been smoothly intent, and fighting where it had almost seemed to fly. She watched it beating back and forth for a time, hoping it might return, but always it threshed away into the wind, and dwindled and lost meaning and never looked back. And it

had never come since, however high the tide, in that spirit of leaping joy directed at the farm.

Of course there was nothing like it about the trap, heavy and crawling and jolting along the road. But it, too, seemed headed towards her as she stood, as if it saw and was coming and couldn't by any chance be stopped. And if Bob wouldn't come in to share the evening meal, the trap, like the boat, would never reach the farm. It, too, the moment it had arrived, would turn its back on the place, and go away...

A sense of loneliness came upon her in the sunny room, and the house that had been so full of expectation and content grew still and listened for old voices and called again upon its hidden ghosts. She wished now that she had gone with Thomas to the gate, to share in the home-coming from the first. Indeed, she started to run down the path and through the gate, and found herself out in the meadow before she scolded herself and returned with a laugh. This was Thomas's father, not hers, who was coming to-day. Her own had been dead for ever so many years. She was only the son's wife, and her place was to welcome him at the door. She remembered the kettle, too, as she hurried back, and was glad she had had the sense to turn in time. She couldn't help wishing,

however, that she might have been there. She would have known, in that first moment, whether her conscience might be at ease. . . .

Back in the kitchen, she filled the kettle and set it on the fire, struggling with the temptation to take another peep at the room upstairs. She argued with herself that she wanted to make sure nothing had been missed, knowing all the while that she had been perfectly sure for hours. It could not be long now before she ushered the old man in, and surely she could manage to wait till then? The room would be all the fresher if she could bring herself to wait, would look to her something of what it looked to him. . . . Thomas's reparation was through outward things, she thought—shelter and physical ease and a decent burying at the last; but hers was through things more subtle, touches that eased the heart. . . . More than comfort and look went to that carpet on the stairs.

She wondered, looking round, which of the changes would strike him first. Which of the new things would catch his eye—the range, the padded chair, the spoons, or the new pots? There was a shelf with reading of some sort, mostly about farming, she believed; and a gate-leg table, left her by an aunt, on which he could lay his fiddle if he chose. In the parlour, of

course, there were treasures without price, wedding-presents and suchlike and sudden fancies at sales; but Sunday, she thought, would be time enough for those. They would have to be careful not to worrit the old man. The kitchen alone would be enough for to-night —that and the other surprises up above.

She had been puzzled to find in herself this sudden passion for a house. She had been willing and busy enough at home, but she had always been glad to get finished and go out. Now, when she went out, she had almost to tear herself away; her household gods might play her false while she was gone. All the inanimate things that made her work—furniture and pots and pans and the rest—they seemed strangely alive to her now, and capable of mischief if she left them too long alone. Even in church she thought of fire and moths, of dry-rot and damp and water-spouts gone wrong. When once the hay was in she felt sure she would never go out at all, but would spend her days watching for the first thread of smoke. There was that fire at Crookfield, only last year, when the dogs had awakened the folk in the pouring dark. They had pulled the furniture out into the yard, and set the pillows and beds along the wall. You did not want to do that every year with your best beds, and there was a wardrobe

or so that never got out at all. Then, on the marsh, there was a further terror to fear—floods that swam into your rooms and left them damp for years. She could see she would fret herself thin before she was through! Of course the possessive fury would die down after a while, but she did not want it to die too soon. The new passion fretted her, but it braced her as well; made her feel strong and capable and rich and proud. . .. .

And just as she had not known of this feeling for a house, so she had not known that a man could count for so much. She puzzled sometimes, staring at Thomas, and thinking how strange it was that eyes should so alter their point of view. Why, there were things she loved about him now for which she had laughed at him before! He was still only the Thomas whom she had flouted so long, and from whom she had parted without a pang; yet now, when he turned his back, she had a sense of fear, as if he had left her straying in some lonely place. . . . But even now she did not know why she had ever rebelled, could find no clue, however vexed for the missed years. It could only be that it wasn't the right time, as she had said. And, after all, Thomas was not the man she had known. She would never see that Thomas of hers again. The strange thing was that she

sometimes wanted that Thomas back—angry and sullen, or awkward and afraid.

Sometimes she held her breath, remembering how narrowly her fortune had been reaped. Thomas had never asked her again after that dogged appeal for his father in the lane. He stayed at hand, it was true, he spoke when they met, and they danced together as before, but he had never again asked her to be his wife. And perhaps his drawing-back had worked the miracle at last, for it was certainly about that time that she had begun to change. Perhaps it was just the natural impulse to want the thing out of reach, or maybe she had a vision of life, of the part that burdens may bear in it and be sweet. Just possibly it was Marget who was the real factor in the change, setting the levers pity and jealousy to work.

Agnes had known Bob's wife from a child, and needed no telling how Kit would fare at her hands. They had been at school together first, though Marget was much the elder of the two, and afterwards they had been rivals or friends as things had happened to run. But Marget had married early and grown old soon, or rather had reached the vinegary age and there remained. Agnes had tried to keep up the acquaintance for a while, but it was not long before her visits ceased. Marget had grown

into a shrew as mushrooms grow between showers, and of a subtle variety before which Agnes shrank. She had known shrews before, and found them human enough, with hearts that were more or less kindly under their fretted nerves. They were not like Marget, venomous all through. She remembered something in Marget, as a child, that had given her even then a kind of power, something inhuman, implacable and cold, that edged her words and barbed the look in her eyes. It had won her a sort of distinction as a girl, so that others had wanted her as well as Bob, but time had soon shown it as merely the passion of a cold woman for riding others down. Agnes, warm-hearted, tolerant and gay, was frankly afraid of Marget by the end. Marget liked to talk of Thomas and hint and jeer, and if the other gave battle in his defence she was terrible indeed. In spite of her idleness and slovenly ways, she still contrived to be terrible and a power. Her methods made Agnes shiver in her chair—thin and insidious and trickling at the first, and then, at the point of contact, bursting forth. She was like an iceberg, chilling you from afar, and crushing and riving and blinding you when you struck. You felt her icy paralysis as you sank; you heard her shrill-voiced grindings as you drowned. Agnes fled from the combat and did

not return, and the reports of her one-time rival worsened with the years. Yet it was up to this arctic terror she had delivered Kit.

But at the end of everything she had married Thomas just for himself, and not for his father or anybody else at all. The finish had come about at Appleton Hall, one of those old homes that, changing from manor-house to farm, have yet contrived to keep their dignity intact. Both she and Thomas were helping as usual at the boon-clip, which fell that year on the hottest day in June. It was always a long day and often hot, but this was the longest and finest she had ever known. Afterwards she divided her life into—life, and then "the clip." If it was true that she had had to wait for the right time, the right time came royally enough on a day so splendid that it seemed bound to affect some destiny before it passed.

She went up to the farm early, before the heat, and was in time to see the sheep coming down from the fells. There was still a haze over the tops, and through it the complaining voices drove and dropped, reaching her long before she saw the flock. When they came out of the haze at last, with their heavy fleeces trailing to the ground, they had the effect of a drifting, woolly cloud. Slim, ghostly dogs darted in and out of the cloud, and behind them

the slender silhouette of a horseman shaped itself through the mist. He had a lamb slung before him when he rode into the yard, a tiny, black-faced thing with dangling hoofs.

Other girls joined her as she went in through the arch, all of them splashes of cool colour in their fresh print gowns. The arch stood twenty feet high in the monster courtyard wall, and topping the wall was a crown of grass and fern. Fern and the dark velvet of old moss were so much a part of the wall that it might have been fashioned of them from the start. At present the yard was in deep shadow, and the house a mere breath of a house, a huddle of formless grey. The covered stone passage was lost and dark that ran along its side. The tall arched windows showed nothing but pools of gloom behind their diamond panes. In spite of voices through its rooms and clatter on its flags, the place seemed barely alive, an embryo slowly evolving with the day. But when the sun, in the wake of the woolly cloud, had climbed the fell and was full above the yard, the house would alter and gain body and stand up firm. Its thick walls would grow solid to the eye, and the lines of them spring out sharp and straight. Its roots would go down deep, and its chimneys would be massed like towers. Colour would come into the grey, and the weight of centuries

lie heavy on its roof. Its vagueness would take on meaning and the unchanging speech of form, together with the aloof dignity of those whose times are other than man's.

For some time she was at work indoors, helping to prepare the food for the day, passing in and out of the dim rooms, each of which seemed to have its own quality of shade, and through low doorways with sudden steps, and up and down curving, whitened stairs. In the high, flagged room that had once been the hall, tables were set on trestles for the afternoon feast. The great beam of the old chimney still showed above the hearth, and high in one of the blue-washed walls was a niche where the fiddler would sit to play. Often and often Agnes had seen old Kit perched aloft in the narrow place that had the look of some ancient shrine.

The stone passage beside the house had four arches opening on to the yard, and when the sun came they made inky frames for figures moving and standing in blinding light, shears that shone like the swords over Eden's Gate, snowy fleeces and the pathetic faces of many sheep. The whole courtyard was full, after a while, set like a stage with the clippers on their creels. The sun beat clear upon them as they worked, carving the sheep, as it were, from shreds of the woolly cloud. Only under the

south wall and the big horse-chestnuts was there any shade, and here in the sudden gloom the faces looked pale, and the cotton kytles of the men were like moths motionless in an evening dusk. Boys tugged the unwilling sheep from the pens and scuffled with them across the yard, or thrust them, clipped, through the wicket in the arch, to meet the branding-iron outside. They looked awkward and strange as they scuttled away, with the inky letters sharp on their close wool. The lambs came up with innocent eyes and open, wailing mouths. They reached out tentative noses, faintly surprised, and were suddenly satisfied and still.

Across the yard was another cool cavern with the yellow slits of open doors yawning in two of its black walls. This was the fleecing-room where the girls were at work, rolling the fleeces and flinging them into the loft. The lock-trimmer sat beside the door, trimming the fleeces as they came in. The soft whiteness of them lay across his knees, and the shears glanced and flashed and made lightnings in the sun.

It was a boon-clip, which meant that the farmers round had come to help, or had sent their sons or daughters or hired men, and one or two sons of squires were at work with the shears as well. There were certain clippers who

always came, and who always sat in the same place, just as the lock-trimmer was always the "lock," and the man with the tar-pot always had the tar. Thomas was one of those who always came, and his place was under the wall of the house facing the arch. Agnes knew why he had chosen this place, though it was one of the hottest in the yard. When he looked out through the arch and the steam of the tar rising misty in the air, he could see the land rolling westward to the sea. "I like to set looking towards the marsh," he always said; "I don't feel suited anywheres else," and though he could not see the marsh for the curving land, he knew where it lay by the light in the sky, as all marsh-bred people know. Year after year he had sat there at the clip, and lifted his head when a pause came, and looked out. But to-day he had left the place for somebody else. To-day he was in the shade by the south wall.

Agnes brought him his first drink, and he took it without so much as a look or a word, and though she had lingered a moment after he took up his shears, they still had not spoken nor had their glances met. She knew well enough, of course, why he had moved; there was no need for him to be afraid that she might ask. All these years when he looked through

the arch he had looked towards his home, and after all the years there was a stranger in his home. There was no point now in looking towards the place where it had been. His eye, as it travelled, would check itself in its flight, just as his body would stop and turn away at the door.

She thought about it all day as she went about her work, or studied him from some corner out of sight. For the first time he was pathetic in her eyes, forsaken, cast-off, a creature without a place. He had a lonely look, she said to herself—poor Thomas without a home! He was a lonely soul, to whom life was being unkind. He might have been master, for instance, and still was only man. He might have had father and wife as well as farm, and instead he had only his dour and dogged self. She, too, had contracted the habit of looking towards the marsh, and had wondered a little and put the wonder by. Now, when she looked, she, too, had a sense of wrong in the loss of a home that might so well have been hers. She began to think of the stranger from her lover's point of view, as an intruder thrusting himself into settled lives. She felt fiercely towards him as towards a cuckoo in the nest, forgetting that she herself had brought the position about. The thing worked in her all the day, gradually weighting

and tilting the scale of her heart. Protective affection sprang up in her full-grown. Thomas, successful and sure, had not been able to win her even in years, but Thomas the failure laid hold of her in an hour. She could not bear that his face should be turned from his own marsh! . . . From one point and another she watched him all day long.

She saw the sheep go back again to their heafs, soft, snowy woolballs on the shining green. Going up, as in coming down, they gave the same impression of moving cloud. They travelled up the fell like smoke blown from a giant's pipe, with no hint of the toil of thousands of little feet. They were going fast, too, though they looked strangely slow on the vast expanse of ground. It was only when she marked them by the end of the long stone wall that she saw how rapidly they climbed. They were like a wave surging always up and up, smoothly, determinedly, drawn by invisible cords. While her eye still watched the corner at the top, they were near it, they were round it, they were all of them silently gone. . . .

After the meal in the big hall there were the usual trotting races and sports. Thomas had always taken a leading part in these events, but to-day he kept dismally aloof, unconsciously helping his new impression on her heart. And at

the end of the day there had been the usual dance.

She happened to be upstairs when the fiddle struck up, and in the cool of the evening she leaned out to hark. Through the windows below she caught the jollity of the reel, the thin cry of the strings and the stamp of feet on the flags. In the room behind her where the great four-posters were, the shadows were creeping and climbing and laying the draperies of the night. There were always shadows within the curtains of the beds, as if they had come for those who had lain there dead, and had never had time to lift and scatter away. With the night there were the shadows of night as well, so that in shadow on shadow those who slept in the beds must lie. On the house itself there was shadow, the mighty shadow of the fells, and suddenly she longed for a room on the edge of things, looking starkly out to sea. There, in the night, one could always breathe, at least. She leaned further until the roses came up about her face, and then she saw Thomas standing by the pens.

At once, as she looked, the veil of her long bewilderment fell away. Now she knew what she wanted, what she meant to do. The wind of that longing for air and space had swept the cloudy room of her mind, and there, with his

face to herself and his back to the sea, Thomas was all that the sudden wind had left. . . . He moved, as if meaning to go, and almost in panic she turned and ran from the room, flying through twisting passages and over the sagging floors. Shafts of light rayed across her from deep-cut window-slits; polished oak doors gleamed at her back as she sped down the bowed and winding stairs. The flood of music and dance swelled up to her as she approached, and she paused for a moment as she passed the room. After the soft purples out of doors which the sun was leaving behind, the room seemed misty and full of a golden dusk, yellow with lamps resisting the dying day. High in the wall the sawing arm that held the bow flung the wild music over the crowd, whirling figures and brown faces and gowns that made streaks of colours under the lights. The mist and the music and the beat of the feet made her head spin as she stood and looked. Her face and gown were framed by the door and the dark behind, and a partner began to edge towards her round the crowd. He was still some distance away when he saw her disappear, like a ghost caught away from the door by hidden hands. Again the longing for space had seized her as she looked. She slid round the door and fled to Thomas in the yard.

They were well on their way to her home before either found anything to say ; and then, " What made you quit so soon ? " she enquired with a rush at last.

He answered her, staring gloomily at the road, that the place was overerowded by a deal. He wasn't as set on daneing as he used. " Likely I'm getting old," he added ; " that'll be it." And then, after minutes and minutes he let himself go. . . . " I eouldn't abide hearing yon fiddle played. 'Twas fiddle as fetched me out, if you want to know."

He turned his head as he spoke, and tried to look through the hedge, and it was west and not east of them where the Hall lay that he looked. Here in the lane, as in the yard, he seemed to hear a fiddle that was dumb, thin and trembling and clear from the edge of the sea. Standing outside the dance he had heard the two musies mingle and clash, and had turned from the sound in the hot room to the sound that drew over miles from the cool tide.

" What fetched *you* out ? " he asked of her, in his turn.

They had stopped in the road as if at some word of command, and the swinging curves of the lane went winding before and behind, shutting them in together this way and hiding them safe together that. The sun, level on the

fields as if smoothed by a hand, was below the thick barrier of the mounted hedge. Only through chinks or the eye of a gate could it find a way, to lie in patches on the hedgerow grass, or splash its pools on the heavily-rutted road. It was more restful than sleep in that cleft between the fields, where the roses, sprayed overhead, took a richer colour against the sky. There was green upon green on the background of dark wood—bramble and hazel, convolvulus and thorn. There were yellow and purple and white sweet peeping faces in the grass; ferns, emerald-fresh, stately in thick groups. And close in the hedge-side, where all else was new, lingered the old dead beech leaves of the year before, waiting for this year's leaves to drift there, too. . . .

Already, though the clippings were barely through, folk were getting to work at the hay. Away, as the land rose fast, they could see a cutter at work, and the flash of the horses' sides as they turned in the sun. The sound of the cutter made sweeter their solitude and peace, yet the voice of it in the silence loosened their difficult tongues.

"I reckon I've made up my mind now," Agnes said, facing him sturdily as he looked away. "Likely I've lost you wi' keeping you hanging round so long. It's nowt to wonder at

if you're tired, I'm sure. But if you're still set on our getting wed, there's nowt as I can see agen putting up the banns. . . .

"It's a bit sudden, happen," she went on, as he did not speak, "and yet I don't know as it's sudden, after all. It's been coming along for a goodish while, I doubt, and what finished it off was you changing your spot in the yard. It made me feel queer like, after all these years. The folks settin' round you had all on 'em got homes, an' there you were settin' among 'em wi' none at all. There was Tommy Todd, you'll think on, as nobody need want, wi' as good a missis as there is in the country-side. There was Neddy Gibbs—him as is near half-rocked—he's a rare good home at the back of him as well. Bob Martin and Billy Dent—ay, an' his brother, Willie George—they've all on 'em homes they can gang to if they want. I could see the doors open at their backs, set for 'em to come in, but I couldn't see owt at the back o' Thomas Sill. I could set a door wi' the best on 'em, I'll be bound! I'm sure an' certain I'd be fain to try. . . ."

But miracles under one's eyes are the last things one believes. "It's pity," he muttered, refusing to look up. "I'm right enough where I be . . . you've no call to fret. It's pity . . . same as you felt for him. . . ."

"It's nowt o' the sort," she exclaimed angrily, and then laughed. "I'll learn you whether it's pity if you get talking stuff like yon! If it's pity, I reckon any lass would do, same as I rather think I said afore. But yon home as I'm wanting for you can't be made by nobody but me—and—eh, you daft lad—I'm wanting it an' all!"

It was the shortest lane in the world, just as the day was the longest in all time. Often enough, hurrying home, she had sighed at its length, but now it fled behind her while her feet were still. Every bend as it came was strange to her eyes, and, turning, she saw it new from the other side. The sun slid away from the fields like a curtain silently withdrawn, and up on the higher land the cutter whirred to a corner and was still. In the lane the night came long before it touched the land beyond—the visible, purple night that has no knowledge of the real dark. The roses, paled of their pink, showed whitened starry faces to the sky, shining above the road like blossoms laid on a pool. Only where some big tree leaned across was there any real night, and as they passed beneath it and so out, they lost each other for a moment in the dark, and found each other on the further side, just as in life they had lost each other for a time, and yet come together, after all.

They heard the birds stir in sudden flutters and be still. They heard wild things in the hedge-row rustle and be still. Horses came to the fence and reached out shadowy heads, and through continual gates they caught the remnants of the lingering day. Sheep in the hedge-bottoms rose and scuttered away, the sound of their going ghostly in the dark. Cattle, lying heavy on the land, turned unaffrighted eyes at their approach. The night air pressed close, warm and a little damp, and there was dew on the long hedge-grass as well as the honeysuckle boughs.

"I doubt it's over late for the farm," Agnes murmured once. "Eh, if we could nobbut set the clock back a year!"

"There's a chance we might get it yet," Thomas replied, but with the new caution he had learned from life. Self-confident Thomas had grown to be careful how he tempted fate. "The new man's shaping badly, so they say. . . ."

She gave a little cry of excitement, and then sighed.

"I don't deserve it, I'm sure; but eh, Thomas, if we should! We'd make it the best spot anywheres about, and we'd have your father to live with us right off. We'd do our best to make up to him all we could. . . ."

But she had forgotten Kit once more when she found herself at her gate, and heard her lover's step going from her down the lane. In her bedroom she watched the moon come up, over the road where they had walked, the patient moon that had not hurried or spied. Parts of the lane would be as bright as day where for their passing had been a velvet dusk. Folks who walked there now would have to whisper low, because voices carried so clearly under the moon. They would see their own shadows close about their feet, so that they would be four instead of two, and therefore never alone. Thomas and she had had no shadows at all, and even the shadows of their wasted years had been hidden by the night.

They had got the farm, after all, but they had had another year to wait. The new tenant's fate had hung in the balance for some time, and though, when the end came, it came short and sharp, there had been much to do before they could move in. The new tenant, who had never had time to become an old tenant, had yet contrived to occasion many repairs. They had had to furnish, of course, and that meant visits to sales, and hours of pondering in Witham shops. There was also her mother to settle with a decent hired girl. The old woman's house was her own, and she had no notion of coming to the

farm. "The old man'll keep you stirring, as it is," she said to her daughter, when the point was raised. "Young folks as is newly-wed don't want old folks hanging round their necks. It'll make you feel what you'll come to, if it doesn't do nowt else. . . ."

So she stayed in the house between the fields while Agnes went to the marsh, and though she paid her an afternoon visit now and then, she could not be coaxed to stop for as much as a night. Agnes would have been glad enough of her company, at times. She found the marsh very lonely at first, and the hours were long when Thomas was out on the land. She did not mind very much when the weather was fine, and she could see the houses winking across the sands, but it was dreary indeed when the bay was blotted out and there was nothing to break the shaken veil of the rain. That was one of her reasons for welcoming old Kit; they would be such cronies, she and the old man! She would see him about the garden while she was at work in the house, and could call to him from the windows if she felt inclined. Just to hear her own voice answered once in a while would give the place a feeling of fresh life. They would sit on the new seat shelling peas, or watching the fishing boats making home with their catch, their sails three-cornered blurs on

the opal evening sky. They would sit on the white-stoned hearth of a winter's night, and watch the fire burn red with the hardening of the frost. He would have tales to tell when the gales came out in the spring, and the narrow sea deepened and frothed into driven flood. Thomas would be out with the sheep, and she would want a tale to distract her from the storm. And sometimes, perhaps, Kit would play her the old, thin tunes, bringing the dance-itch back to her sober feet. That careless pleasure seemed to have dropped behind—not but what she could dance with the smartest yet. But she seemed to herself to have shut a door at her back, and behind that door were the strains of a violin.

She began to sing as she went about, and her voice escaped through the open windows and fled away through the door; yet it was in the house all the time as well. Down on the shore a man looked up as he stepped on the sands, hearing the voice that was both within and without. The house looked empty, he thought, with all its windows wide, and the voice that sang seemed a bodiless voice, making the house the emptier for its song. It followed him as he went leisurely out, making for the channel and the farm across. He did not hurry, for the tide would not be ready to turn for over an hour.

Presently he was on the bank, hailing the farm for a boat, and his voice, shrill and lost-sounding in the open space, broke like a cry for help across the joy of the song. Thomas, down by the gate, heard both the song and the cry, but the old man coming in the trap heard only the fiddle singing on his knee.

She sang so long that she did not know when she stopped, but Thomas, down by the gate, felt as if a fiddle-string had snapped. He had the same sense as of something wounded and ceasing to be. It was just at that moment the trap checked at his side. . . .

The wife in the house looked out and saw the marsh roads empty north and east and south. The crawling speck she had watched so long must have reached its stopping-place at last. She thought again of the yacht, swinging so eagerly over the tide, only to turn so suddenly at the end. Even the highest hopes, it seemed, met barriers they could not leap. . . . But the trap, when the time came for it to turn, trundling over land that had once been sailing-ground as well, would leave something behind it when it went away. It would leave a heart in haven, a spirit released, a wanderer come home. She wondered what they were saying to each other, away down there under the thick hedges by the meadow-gate. She wondered if Kit would

notice the new gate, its new paint and how easily it swung. The other had been an ancient of days unwilling to be moved, protesting with rusty hinges and the creak of rotten wood. And, when once it was opened, you had to scurry through, so great was its haste to creak itself back to rest. . . .

But of course he would never notice it to-night, after all the excitement of the ride. It was one of the grand new changes to be shown him later on. Thomas, trained in sound methods on a well-kept farm, seemed already to have changed the character of this. It was almost as if it had pulled itself together under the mere glance of his disapproving eye. Roots looked healthy, the corn was even and getting ahead; the hedgerows were clear of nettles and the meadows of thistles—on the whole. The hay was doing well and was thick at the roots; they hoped to be cutting in a week. The old man would be pleased with the new machines, the cutter and tedder in their brilliant coats of blue. There were the horses, too, bargains and rare good beasts. He would hardly know either stable or shippon, with all that the Squire had done in the way of repairs. And as for all the fine new things about the house—why, it would take a month of Sundays to see them all!

She had, in that last pause, one of those

rare moments when joy is awaited fully prepared. All was swept and garnished about her for this hour, as perfect as she could make it in the time; perhaps it would never be as perfect again. Now she could put aside the work of the weeks and meet the occasion with a settled mind. Both to herself and to Thomas, hardly conscious of it though they were, there was something symbolic in the coming event. Both recognised, more or less, that they were owed a grudge by fate. In their search after happiness, they had made someone sad. In their groping after each other they had allowed somebody to be alone. Now that life had given them so much they were ashamed to think that somebody was poor. This coming of the old man stood for atonement on their part, resurrection on his. It meant the sanction of fate to hold their consciences clear. . . .

So they had put into this home-coming everything that they knew of kindly work and pleasant conspiring and kindly thought. There was nothing within their compass that they had left undone, nothing omitted that held a welcome of its own. They meant him to walk straight into peace out of the passion through which he had passed, while they looked on with relieved hearts, not quite certain whether they were forgiven sinners or his guardian saints.

Not that it mattered if only old Kit was pleased ; if only their good but troubled souls might rest.

And still there was no sign of the guest, though she felt sure the splendid moment had begun. Of course they would wait for a final word with Bob, after Thomas had helped the old man down. Bob would be asked, of course, to come to the house, but if he had hired or borrowed the trap he would have to be getting back. She had never included Bob in the picture in her mind, except as a part of the trap as it lumbered away. And that parting crack would not be a long one, she felt sure. Kit would be tired and fretting to get indoors, and Thomas would know she was waiting for them—and tea. She was rarely glad she had got that ham for tea. . . .

Again, as she waited, she felt a wish to go to the gate. There was no reason, really, why she shouldn't run down. The old man would likely be glad of another arm. Folks getting up in years were easily upset, and joy was often a bit terrible to the old. He would be ready for bed before so long . . . and she would wake in the night and wonder whether he slept. She forgot the gate in thinking of the room, and how it would nëver be quite the same again. Surely there was no harm in taking a last peep ? Those

folks at the gate wouldn't be up yet. She would hear their voices coming up the field, and could be down in time to meet them at the door. She looked again and found nothing and made up her mind. She disappeared up the carpeted stair.

II

CHRISTOPHER SILL sat in the kitchen at Marget's, waiting to be taken away. He was a tall old man, with broad shoulders that were now bent, blue, inward-looking eyes and quiet ways. In spite of his size he gave an impression of lightness which was partly the frailty of age and partly the spirit within, but he was too big for the kitchen, which was smaller than even his wash-house had been at home. No matter how he compressed himself, or shrank into corners and held his breath, he seemed perpetually in the way. His feet, too, which had been his innocent pride, once so light in the dance, and still quite neat in spite of their clumsy boots, were, so it seemed, the largest in the world. Either Marget or the children were for ever catching them as they passed, and in addition to kicks from other clumsy boots, he had to bear the onus of every mishap. Apparently his feet were responsible for every broken pot, for a spilt pan, for the children's torn clothes, for the unsteady baby's every fresh bruise. Tumbling over Gran'pa was the

accepted cause of each new piece of damage and any sudden, ear-piercing howl. There had been room for every man's feet in the house from which he had come, and full room for a man's stride on the long levels of the marsh. He had never realised his actual bodily size before.

Nor had he been conscious that human beings might press too close. He had never troubled about the crowded rooms in which he had had to play, the whirling dancers and the thick, lamp-poisoned air. But he had come to them with his lungs full of the breath of the marsh, and had gone out of them to the same clean draught. And he had never minded the press below his platform or around his chair, or the women's dresses brushing against his knees. Between himself and the crowd there had often been the bond of a friendly liking as well as the tie of a pleasure equally shared. He was depressed by a scanty gathering, and much preferred a real crush, even though in the stamping and shuffling his music was apt to be drowned. The things that the fiddle were saying reached every one of them all the same, even those who were too far from him to hear. The more happy folks there were, the more happiness there was in the room, and so it could never be too full. He had never stifled through the long night

hours as here in Marget's kitchen he stifled in the day. He and his fiddle were never alone in there, could never get themselves really out of sight. The children were always about him, shrill and curious and infinitely cross, and when Marget came into the kitchen there was simply no room for anyone else at all. She seemed to be sharply and aimlessly all over it at once, just as an ill-tempered wind seems to blow from every quarter at the same time. He shrank if she touched him or came too near, and her draggled gowns worried him as they passed.

The kitchen was dark, not only because there would have been darkness wherever Marget happened to be, but because its one small window was shadowed by the chestnuts across the road. It seemed like a little dark well to the man who had lived in a wind-freshened house with the whole of the open west to lighten his eyes. Yet there might have been something to love in it, he knew. There were other houses in the little old row, heavy with roses white and red, with trellised porches and gay little flower-beds either side of the door, where on a summer day the kitchens were little dim places of cool peace. He knew that, because he had been into them sometimes, and rested for a while in an arm-chair by the whitened hearth, while its proper tenant left him alone or knitted

in silence with soothing little clicks. There were geraniums in those windows in pots, and cool, little starched lace blinds, and though the windows were small the sun reached round the pots and dropped a splash of gold on the stone floor. The pots themselves made patches of mellow colour on the sill, and there was a text on the wall which the sun always seemed to find. "Where the treasure is, there will the heart be also," it said, and Kit knew better than anything else in the world what that text meant. There was a heap of gold in a bottom corner and a clutter of angel-crowns above, but Kit knew that real treasure had nothing to do with things like those.

On those summer days the footpath under the trees was black, so that the lasses passing in their light gowns looked like coloured pictures on a dark screen. The road was half a patterned shadow flung by the trees, and half a ribbon of dazzling limestone white. When carriages came along, the pattern changed to the horses' backs, and the silvered harness flashed and shone in the sun. Sometimes there was a whirl of dust after they had passed, but none of it came in because door and window were shut, yet he did not feel stifled because the door stood open into the scullery at the back, and the door of that again into the garden beyond. You went

up to the garden by old steps sunk deep into the bank, with moss so thick about them that the colour of it seemed to have grown into the stone itself. There were bright flowers up above, mere flecks of colour high and far away, when the sun was standing over the slanting beds. The door made a picture for him as he sat, a vivid shimmer of gold and scarlet and green, yet it was too far off to trouble his old eyes. Sometimes he stared at it until he slept, with the polished fiddle gleaming across his knee. The silent knitter would watch the fiddle with an anxious eye, waiting to catch it when it slipped. But even in sleep his fingers held it safe, because always in sleep it was with him where he went.

He used to thank the people in these houses of good rest, but he was not always perfectly certain which was which, and to the day of his death he never knew their names. There were real corners in those kitchens of theirs, where the old could gather themselves into the shadow unobserved. The kitchen at Marget's was exactly the same size, but it had no corners that he could ever find; only bare walls set rigidly each to each, where naughty children could be sent to sulk, and dust might settle and gather at its will. The other kitchens had space and they had peace. Those of their occupants

who thought them poor and mean found themselves suddenly proud in possession after he had gone. It was as if he had placed a charm on the table before he went away.

But he was not often able to seek these hiding-places from the storm. Marget was one of those souls jealous of a burden they do not want but will not share. Even while she resented his presence under her roof, she resented equally that he should be happy anywhere else. He was welcome to hate her as much as he chose, but she demanded that he should hate other folk as well. If he was hers to see to, she would have him all to herself, and nobody should take him from her even for half an hour. Besides, she lacked the full flavour of abuse when he wasn't about the house. In the dark kitchen, in spite of his size, she could not always be sure that he was there. She might trip over something and snarl, "Drat you! Mind your feet!" before she discovered that it was only a stool.

So it was not very often he could get away; she hunted him down too rigorously for that. And even out of her sight he was conscious of the obsession of her thought. Even during those snatched moments, seldom as they came, there lurked round every corner the possibility of her face. It was only in sleep that he ever really escaped, and even then he awoke some-

times to find her watching him from the door—her gnawed and useless bone that she still would drag to her cave.

She said such terrible things, too, to the silent knitters of his peace. Suddenly the little kitchen would be full of battering, brazen-sounding speech, carrying so far along the street that folk would hear it and come out. When Marget emerged with her bone between her teeth, they would be standing in little knots or edging towards the door. Little boys came out of nowhere as they always do, and sometimes a passing carriage would be brought to a halt. Through it all Marget would swim on a powerful stream of abuse, while he went quiet in her clutch, his fiddle gathered close. Sometimes people laughed, and he heard, and that was worst of all.

Only at night had he respite for a while. Two of the children slept in his little room, and even they, incredibly curious as they were, were forced to close their peering eyes at times. The old man, kept awake when he might have slept, could not always sleep later on, and often sat for hours by his window, looking out into the night. Up there, it almost seemed as though he were in the chestnuts over the road, only out in the branches where the birds slept it was cool, and full of a rocked and murmuring peace. Sometimes, though, on the stillest nights,

not a leaf moved or shook on the giant boughs, but more often there was a little breeze that whispered busily all the time. There was a wind, too, that did nothing but sigh, and another that hissed in angry little gusts. The one that sighed meant that thunder was about, and the fretted one was the herald of change and rain. And another wind rolled in a long, soft soughing all the way through the trees, like the long, smooth waves of a very far-off tide. It would swell and rise while he listened for it to break, but always it ebbed and died without breaking at all. Sometimes it stopped in the midst of the downward curve, like a sentence softly suspended without cause. He liked this wind because it took him back to the marsh, but best of all he liked the big gales that came to him straight from the west. The wind that thrashed and tramped on the great trees, that hammered the little window of his room and sent great draughts down chimneys and through keyholes, and flung the blue slates spinning into the street, came to him straight from the place where he belonged. Sometimes, when it was very dark and wild, he was sure the street was full of the sea. He thought of it rolling and pushing at all the doors. . . . There was a meadow beyond the chestnuts over the road, and often he heard the water under the wall,

like the tide that beat at the banks along the marsh.

He was fond of that meadow beyond the trees, with its shimmering levels golden in the sun, yet cool to the eye because of the shadow in between. At first he spent his time by the leaning wall, talking to people as they came along, but that was another thing Marget couldn't abide. Strangers stared at his violin, and asked questions, and that vexed her pride. It was like a beggar-man, she said, to be seen with a fiddle in the street. Folks would be giving him coppers before so long, and shaming them all and pulling them all down. Kit held to his talking-ground for a while, but after one dreadful episode he gave way. Sometimes people asked if the old man were dead, the old man with the fiddle beside the wall.

He liked the meadow best of all in the dawn, when it took on the look of parkland wrapped in early mist. Right across, through a break in the chestnuts, he could see another tree stand up, a tree that, because of the haze, looked tiny as a toy. The shadow of it, black when the sun got up, was at first no more than a darker veil of mist along the sward. There was magic about this little vignette in which there was only a tree. It was so tiny and grey and tender, so light, so delicately soft. Yet, small as it

was, it suggested infinite space, stretches of wander-room, pleasaunces without end. There were no barriers about it that had to be pushed away. You knew that from under its branches you could see the world.

Even when the sun was up at last, and the tree was strong wood and the earth firm soil, when the leaves had found colour and the boughs taken their shape, the little vista kept its promise still. Still it was growing in enchanted air, amid the far distances of the soul's desire.

And then the house around him would come awake. The children would fight each other in their beds. All through the house would pierce the edginess of Marget's morning voice. . . .

He lost his vignette when the chestnuts lost their leaves, and through the stripped boughs the picture was not the same. But the chestnuts themselves were enough for him, just then, with their straight-grown limbs cut black against the sky, and every delicate filament of twig sparkling and dazzling with the frost. In the winter, too, he could see the moon through the trees, a flat and silver face laid to the open spaces as to a pane. Star after star he saw balancing on a bough.

At the end of the village was the river that he had known only where it ran out over the sand. It was dear to him, because it went

towards the marsh, but otherwise it was not the river he knew. Out there it was silver or thin blue, sometimes a dull and hurrying grey, but always it held the mirror of its face wide open to the sky. Here it was black, because of the high banks and the old bridge and the big trees leaning right across. It was a glorious black, velvet-smooth, with underneath it the colours of weeds and stones and darting fish, and the reflection of other colours overhead. There were trees in the water, too, as real as those above ; he could not always tell which was which. They had the same vivid, wide-spreading green, the same ribbed and splendid trunks. It was like looking down into a forest from a bird's wing, only the forest was overhead as well. It seemed as far to look down as it was to look up. He thought the mirror-picture the daintier of the two—cleaner, as it were, for the water washing over its face ; like the forests one sees through the polished glass of a dream. There was only one other difference that he could see. When the trees above stood perfectly still, the trees in the water seemed to wave and dance. But it was only the ripple across the river's face. Beneath it the painted picture was still and serene.

He was fond of the bridge, too, and liked to wait for the sun dipping under its curve, but it

was not often that he had a chance of that. The children were in league with Marget to hunt him down, and could spy him out in the most unlikely spots. Then they would harry him back along the street, beating at him with dirty little hands, and though he felt dreadfully ashamed and hurt, it was better than being fetched by Marget herself. "Grandpa" added zest to the children's lives, gave them a sense of drama, a heady taste of power. Their days would lack a certain excitement when Marget's bone was gone. . . . In the end he gave up the bridge as he had yielded the wall, because the pleasure was not worth the risk. The river under the bridge was not his own river, after all. Safe in his mind he had it where he liked it best, pale on the brown waste as it swam to sea.

There were other things strange to him in Marget's house, besides the absence of room and peace. He found, for instance, that he could not love the tables and chairs. He could not even love his rickety bed, which carried him homeward when he slept, and was the stall to his fairyland through the trees. Certainly he could not love Marget's pots, which were never whole or clean, or the kettle which poured boiled cockroaches from its spout. Nor could he like the propped-up chests of drawers into which it was never safe to put a hand, for fear

of upright needles or relics of bacon fat. It was not wise to look too closely at the kitchen sink or into the few battered pans used by the children in their play. The clock was stuffed with rags and boots, and had a sinister face which he disliked. The oilcloth on the stairs was full of holes.

Of course, he did not hate the things just because they were old. The house on the marsh, as Agnes knew, had been very neglected before the last. The old things around him were falling to pieces under his eyes, but they were not being kicked and battered to their end. They were really old, peacefully grown old, not abused into miserable age before their time. There were dust and cobwebs and broken furniture and torn clothes, but the sun or the wind was cleansing the place every hour. There was no dirt in dark corners or refuse under the stairs. There were no slimy walls or messes in doubtful pots. In the old chests of drawers were no mysteries save those that a tidy old woman's hands had folded away. The things had been lovable in that house, because in spirit they were clean. They had lived an honest life, and they were not dying an obscene death. Always about the furniture lingered the sweetness of the tree.

Perhaps he might have grown fond of his

own chair, but then he never had a chair of his own. Marget's chairs were as restless as herself; you never found them twice in the same place. And age, as Kit very quickly learned, was last and behind that in that house. If he happened to show a liking for a seat, he was sure to be ousted by some elbowing child. Quite soon he learned to wait until the rest had settled down, and to fit his old bones into anything that was left. Only Bob, when he was at home, would find his father the most comfortable chair.

He had no place at the table, either, and he was always served last, and sometimes Marget seemed to forget him and he had to go without. Even when she chose to remember, he could not always eat what she had cooked. That meant that he was hungry most of the time, and because he was hungry the time was very long.

He had come to the cottage, as Thomas knew, without any bitterness in his heart. Leaving the farm had meant the end of all things, of course, but as long as he wasn't bitter there was room for hope, and he had always been able to beautify what he touched. Never once, even in his mind, had he reproached Thomas for condemning him to this. Thomas would have helped him, had it been possible, he felt sure. The lads were all good lads, alive or dead,

and there had never been anything wrong between him and them. Marget made a point of telling him very soon that Thomas could have saved him if he had liked, but it passed Kit by like a wasp in a gale of wind. She was always abusing Thomas and Kit's old friends on the marsh. All the things that were wrong about him came solely from living on the marsh. They were a low lot down there, so Marget said, living like savages all the week, and only at market seeing their fellow-men. They bred wastrels and do-nowts like himself, cracked on fiddling and the like, whom other folk had to keep in their last years. And again she would harp on Thomas and his crime, but she never succeeded in making him understand. Her talk about the marsh and its folk conveyed nothing to old Kit. It was like somebody talking of a country they had never seen.

And such a little kindness would have made him content. He was away so much in his own mind that he did not need very much from the folk with whom he lived. And instead of a little kindness he had had a great deal. Women had thought for his comfort all his life, children had always run to him before ; and it took him a long time to grasp that things were changed. He had come into the cottage with a trustful smile, but his smile was one of the things that

went first. He never forgot that first tempest in Marget's terrible voice, and the hostile looks of her sly and peering brood. And yet the fact that he could not love them had grown upon him only by degrees. He had never lived with poverty coupled with hate, and he could not grasp its indications for long. But he never learned to love any one of the crowd, any more than he learned to love the chairs.

Bob was as kind as possible when he was at home, but that was so seldom that he did not count. Slack in everything else, he had at least grown smart in keeping out of the way. Even Marget, who knew the backways of truth as well as anybody on earth, could not always discover where he lied. So he was not often at hand to come between his father and his wife, though he stood up for the old man when he was there. But under the roof where Marget ruled only the strongest soul could call itself its own. Bob seemed to fade, to be far-off in the little room with the narrow walls, where Marget towered to the ceiling and covered the whole floor. Yet she was only a middle-sized woman, after all, where he was six foot and broad, but a word from her tongue was like a slap from a clout, the look in her eye was like the dig of a pin. Her scurrying slippers, flapping at her heels, left no calm place where her footsteps had not been.

Because there was nothing to love, something had gone out of the old man after a while. He was polite and gentle, as he had always been, but now he grew very quiet, as though a finger was laid on his tongue. He did not always see what was under his nose, and when he was spoken to he did not always hear. He looked "lost," Marget said, and the word was truer than she knew. Of course he had always "mooned," as she called it, all his life, but behind the mooning the vital spark was plain. His mind was off on its travels, but it was sharply alive, and when it came back it brought with it fire from Heaven. But now there was no winged spirit behind his eyes. He lived in his dreams, but they never came down to earth.

Thomas, in one of his rare calls, noticed the difference without knowing what it meant. "The old man's not as lish as he was," he said to himself, watching his father with a troubled frown. "Likely it's just he's getting up in years. . . . Going that seldom I'm bound to see a change. . . ." But years should have meant nothing to Kit, as he was vaguely aware. At the farm the old man would have remained a happy child, even to the last minute of his dying bed. Thomas pushed the worry to the back of his mind, but though he could not define the difference, he knew the cause. It was

Marget who had smothered that long-lived spirit of youth.

Even with her hand pressing upon it, it had taken months to die. It had never really flickered out until he had ceased trying to find one of them to love. He had tried each of them in turn, from the rating, jibing mother herself to the red-haired baby screaming on the hearth, and then he had suddenly let them all go. Perhaps it might never have died at all if Marget had allowed him to play his fiddle from time to time, but it was the first part of him at which she struck. The sound of it seemed to send her out of her mind, and even the baby greeted it with yells. Certainly, its unearthly, quivering note, peculiarly thin and sweet, made an almost heart-breaking wail in the little house. He did his best to obey, but it was a long time before he learned to keep his fingers from the strings. Often he found himself playing without knowing that he had begun, and awoke to a chorus of abuse and screams. He would play in the night, too, forgetting that it was night, and then even the neighbours would start knocking at the walls. There was always music singing in his mind, so that he did not always know when the fiddle was singing, too. He used to wonder, when they made so much to-do, how it was they did not hear the other music as well.

But even the red-haired baby did not seem to hear that. Anyhow, if it did, it did not scream.

When he found that he could not play in the house, he tried to find somewhere to play outside—down by the river, for instance, close to the bridge. He had a rather wonderful time down there until Marget scented him out. Sitting on a great root at the water's edge, he would play to the forest above and the forest beneath, until folk came along walking through the one, while their reflections walked through the other, down below. They used to seat themselves on the tree-trunks near or stand about him in groups, while he played them varsovianas and schottisches and reels. Of course there were always children, but others came as well, and sometimes there was quite a crowd. The music would run to the village across the fields, though never as far as Marget's open door. But over the river and up the park it went as far as it liked, and as far as it liked with the river down to the sea. On the grass at the river's edge the sun threw patches never twice alike, and the listening faces looked paler under the trees. Kit, in his old clothes, was just a bit of the trunk on which he leaned, except for the flying movements of his hands. Beside him was the velvety water, deep black, shot and shivered by gold

patines and leaf-dances and lacy patterns and bright gleams.

Sometimes, when he was tired, he talked to the crowd, telling them of old dances and melodies and old times. They left the tree-trunks, and came nearer by degrees, the lads with their hands in their pockets and the children with fingers in their mouths. He looked round at their friendly eyes, and thought how nearly all eyes changed when a fiddle was played. If anybody laughed or jeered at first, he was an open or a sneaking worshipper before long. Sometimes the women who lived near brought him a cup of tea and a snack to eat, and nothing he ever had at Marget's heartened him half so much. And on especially blessed days when the tunes went like so much unwound silk, there came somebody who remembered Fiddlin' Kit.

It was after one of these days, taking him clean back to happier times, that he brought a horrible vengeance on himself. One afternoon, when the children were coming home from school, he went out to the forbidden footpath under the chestnuts and played. He forgot all about the cottage just across, and Marget of the music-hating heart. He forgot that he was only a beggar-man and that somebody paid his keep. He only remembered that he was Fiddlin'

Kit, at sight of whom folk had always danced, and the feet of the children stirred his ancient blood. The young feet, the feet of the coming generation of dancers, always stirred his blood. From the end of the village they came skipping down the road, singing a little tune they had learned in school. Most of them came in twos and threes, linked together by twining arms, or trailing a little cloak by its hem in the dust. Some whispered great mysteries in others' ears. Some held a little school on the kerb, as if they had not already had enough, and in the midst of the lesson gathered themselves up and ran. And all the time, here and there, some of them sang, and the tune that they sang got into the fiddle and played. Kit, down the long perspective of the street, saw the white school from which they had come, and the tune, as it were, coming with them out of the door. He had known the song long ago, and he never forgot a tune. It was only in nature that the fiddle should sing, too.

Marget, staring crossly at neglected plants in the ill-treated patch behind the house, heard both fiddle and voices lilting over the roof. They climbed the slates and swung off the chimney-tops to drop in delicate sweetness on her head. She thought of Kit, of course, in the first breath, but remembered that she had

left him nodding in the house. The red-haired baby, she knew, had had him under its eye. She glanced suspiciously down the cottage backs, wondering which harboured this nuisance to the rest. The Martin boy had a fancy for fiddling, she believed; she had caught him talking to Kit about it in the road. Then there was that lass of Simpson's that thought she played—the one that was going to service before so long. Folks never seemed to care whether the neighbours liked the noise, though they were fit to swear if the red-haired baby cried. There was more than one that she wanted a word with about that, a word flung in like a bomb at a cottage door. This dratted fiddling might give her her excuse, so she picked up her vegetables and hurried down.

She thought of Kit again as she flapped along, and again told herself that it was somebody else. He was safe enough under her thumb, by now, the silly old man. He had given her a deal of trouble at first, fiddling in other folks' houses when he might not fiddle in hers, but of course she had easily traced him by the sound. Then she had stolen upon him unawares, breaking the harmonies like so much silvered glass, and after a time or two he had never done it again. Besides, this playing came from the street, and if she was sure of anything

she was sure she had cured him of that. It was much more likely to be some fiddling tramp, who would be knocking for ha'pence at her door. She slipped as she ran down the steps to give him the best of her tongue, and the potatoes flew out of her apron left and right. It took her some minutes to pick them up again, and as she was doing so the music changed. Now it was playing a dismal little tune, and little voices began to sing it in breathless little jerks. On the top of the tune she heard laughter and applause, and then fiddle and voices went on their way alone. Puzzled, she scrambled up with grubby hands, bunched the potatoes in her grimy apron and opened the cottage door.

The old man stood on the footpath under the trees, his ear bent to the fiddle as he played. His eyes, looking gravely before him at the scene, were as intent as if the fate of nations hung on his bow. The street was full of folk as far as she could see, and in the midst of them the children were playing "London Bridge." Under the trees and over the sun-flecked road they moved slowly and solemnly to the tune, and between the laughing folk on either side their faces looked serious and sad. There were babies among them, for this is the little children's game, and even the babies' faces were sad. They stood facing each other in rows across the

street, keeping themselves up by the grasp of their little hands. Sometimes they lost their balance and fell down, but they were so intent on the game that even as they bumped their faces never changed. Suddenly Marget discovered some of her own offspring in the crowd, and that the younger ones were even taking part. Last of all she saw the red-haired baby among the rest, clenching determined fists and setting a firm mouth.

"London Bridge is broken down,
Broken down, broken down.
London Bridge is broken down,
(My fair Ladye!)

Build it up with pins and needles,
Pins and needles, pins and needles.
Build it up with pins and needles,
(My fair Ladye!)

Pins and needles rust and bend,
Rust and bend, rust and bend.
Pins and needles rust and bend,
(My fair Ladye!)"

Marget made a rush as soon as she got her breath, but the crowd closed in before her and held her back. She could see the smiling faces all along the street, people staring over the shoulders of others or peering over their heads, leaning out of upstairs windows and sitting along the wall. There were even faces peeping down from the trees, and drawn up close to

the kerb was the Squire's carriage and pair. The horses' heads were turned away from the scene, but the Squire and his wife were leaning over the hood. Even the coachman was screwing his neck as far as it would go, and as for the footman, he had forgotten himself right out, and had turned about and was kneeling on the seat. And in the midst of the smiles and amusement and applause the babies bobbed and moved with never a smile, and the old man played as if he played before kings.

"Here's a prisoner we have got,
We have got, we have got.
Here's a prisoner we have got,
(My fair Ladye!)

What's the prisoner done to you,
Done to you, done to you?
What's the prisoner done to you?
(My fair Ladye!)

Stole my watch and broke my chain,
Broke my chain, broke my chain.
Stole my watch and broke my chain,
(My fair Ladye!)"

It was the first and only time that Marget's children got anywhere near his heart. Even the elder ones had forgotten to be cross and ugly under the spell of the game. They laughed and skipped as they watched, and sang the tune and clapped their hands with the rest. As for the red-haired baby, Kit's eyes followed it all

the time. He had given up the red-haired baby latest of all, and now it seemed he had captured it at last. It seemed to him for the first time to have a look of his own babies, who were either dead or lost in the likenesses of men. He watched it stumbling over its own feet and taking headers over its dirty gown. In the house it would have screamed until it choked, but now it picked itself up without a sound, and the solemn intensity never left its face. He watched it tail up behind the rest until it was circled by the gaolers' arms, and saw its eyes widen as sentence was pronounced.

"Off to prison she must go,
She must go, she must go!
Off to prison she must go,
(My fair Ladye!)"

The fiddle shivered and halted and the tune nearly broke. It seemed to him suddenly a rather cruel little game. It was not a game, really, but a memorial to a tradition—the tradition that the foundation-stones of London Bridge had been sprinkled with the blood of little children. The babies were right who treated it as drama and not play. Ever since the beginning of the world children had been martyrs in some cause, and in the little song was the sound of all that they had suffered through the years. When the fiddle jarred the

enchantment halted, too, and into the red-haired baby's face came panic fright. It was at that moment that Marget broke through the crowd and snatched it into her arms.

The babies tumbled about her as if she had struck them down, flung out of the magic, bewildered and alarmed. Some of them burst into loud sobs, and even above Marget's voice came the red-haired baby's cries. She hustled the crowd right and left with a fierce arm, that seemed mighty enough to push even the Squire's carriage out of the way. Coachman and footman were already mere liveried backs, with a couple of crested buttons winking in the sun. "Making such a stir in front o' folks' doors," Marget said, "and keeping the poor barns from their tea an' all! It was a pity folks hadn't summat better to do than to go dancing and singing like a German band. But there was no sense o' decency in yon wastrel she and her husband had to keep. You might as well keep a dancing bear and ha' done wi' it right out!"

She reached Kit where he stood with a dropped bow, and caught hold of his arm with an angry pull. He moved mechanically at her touch, and was dragged away to the house without looking at her once. His head swam with the violent flow of her speech and the shrieks of the baby flung across her arm. Once he shrank,

hearing a giggle out in the crowd. But the Squire thanked him by name as he went by.

It passed, of course—all that vast and returning storm which followed these mistakes, shaking the house like a powder-mill gone up, until the frightened neighbours hammered at the walls. He left behind him at last the shock and shame of that afternoon, forgetting it in the healing of his dreams. But for a time he kept a faint affection for the red-haired baby who had entered so passionately into his game, and at first it seemed to be attracted to him, too. It would clutch itself on to its feet by the help of his knee, and stand staring at him with great, demanding eyes, as if asking him for the magic they had made together in the street. It even tried to play the game by itself, mopping and mowing in its trailing skirt, but the fiddle never came to its aid, and very soon it ceased to ask. It forgot to lift up wondering, seeking eyes, by which even the dirtiest baby may win a heart, and became again the chief terror of the house. Always, that is, excepting Marget herself. But then Marget's terror was on a plane of its own. The red-haired baby, at least, was human in its misdeeds, but Marget was elemental, inhuman as packing ice.

And yet, even after the link with the baby had gone, a touch of feeling for Marget stayed

with Kit. He had had a glimpse of her while it stood in the gaolers' hands, and the game had begun to harrow its little soul. Marget had looked as perhaps those other mothers had looked, as mothers always look in the grip of the great fear. . . . While he remembered it, he saw her with different eyes.

But even that attempt at sympathy went the way of the rest at last. Marget was as open-handed with her smacks as she was open-mouthed with abuse, and the red-haired baby came in for the hardest smacks of all. He watched long enough for that glimpse to come again, but it never did. He was one of those who make angels out of a passing smile, and even to Marget he looked to show a wing. But the feet of even his wandering trust had struck a blind alley at last, and, seeing the face of her daily life, he forgot the look that had made him drop his bow.

It was shortly after this, too, that the Persecution of the Fiddle began, leaving him little time for dreams or anything else. All his life the fiddle had been secure as the Lady riding through Ireland in her gems, but it was in peril in a robber-country now. On the marsh he had never been afraid to lay it down where he chose, on table or chair, in the garden or the hedge-side. Somebody was sure to bring it back if

it was lost, and nobody ever dreamed of doing it harm. Sometimes his own dog fetched it home, without as much as a scratch on the shining wood, and once a butcher had seen it in the grass, and turned his horse with it on the road he had come. And there was a tale that a great musician had found it on the shore, and taken it far out and played it on the sands. Kit could never be persuaded to speak of that, because it was the nearest thing to stealing that had come the fiddle's way. Besides, he had an idea that it was never afterwards quite the same. There was a certain un-English fierceness in the lower notes, an occasional puzzling wildness in the higher. It had gained something rather wonderful and strange, but it seemed to him that it had lost something, too. Still, the fiddle itself had come back safe to the farm, with a little note of thanks that was signed by a famous name.

He kept his trick of confidence for months after he arrived at Marget's house. The fiddle came down with him in the morning when he rose, and during the day might be found anywhere at all, from the door-mat to the mantelpiece or the flowerless flower-box on the sill. It was a miracle that it escaped being thrown on the fire, or stamped to pieces under the children's feet. There were occasional terrible moments

when it really disappeared, and nobody would help him in the search. Once it was away from him for a whole night, and he sat on his bed in the dawn, and was wholly uncomforted by his magic tree. But he did not believe that it was lost, and he was right, for during the morning a neighbour brought it timidly to the door. He learned to be careful, however, after that, and seldom let the fiddle out of his hands.

But now Marget announced boldly that she meant to destroy it before she was done. Perhaps she was really ashamed because her father-in-law had fiddled in the street; she had so little of any other shame that at least there was plenty to spare. Perhaps it was just a natural hate of a beautiful thing beyond her ken, or a grudge for that touch of terror in the red-haired baby's face. In any case, she meant to steal the fiddle as soon as she could, and make an end of it before his eyes. She let the children share in this pleasant game, offering a reward, and setting them to catch him off his guard. She could not take the fiddle from him by force, because in spite of his age he would have given her a hard fight. Besides, there was as much pleasure in the promise of the crime as there could possibly be in the crime itself. She was always hinting at plots that couldn't help but succeed, and her nods and winks to the grinning

fry turned the old man cold. Her provisions for the doom of the fiddle were various in the extreme. She would burn it . . . break it in pieces with the axe . . . crucify it on the kitchen door. She would give it to the ragman to take away in a bag, or to the children to bury in the field. She would fling it into the barrel out at the back, and they would all stand round and watch it sink and drown. "And what'll Gran'pa do wi' his daft self then?" she would ask of the children with meaning smiles, while Kit sat still before an untouched plate. The children would echo her words and nudge each other and laugh, and he would clutch the fiddle under the table until it spoke.

In the dark well where it was so difficult to see he felt always about him creeping fingers and prying eyes. In the narrow room which had neither corners nor dreaming-places for the old, there seemed always a host of spies that crouched and peered. When he drowsed in spite of himself on a hot afternoon, he would start awake to find stealthy hands grasping at the treasure on his knee. Instinct told him, as a rule, when the enemy was about, but sometimes the fiddle warned him with a speaking string. He used to think that it knew its danger as well as he; but of course it didn't do to

trust to that. Small wonder he learned to take it with him in his dreams!

He thought once of asking Thomas to take it away, so that at least it would be safe from Marget and her gang. This was on one of the days when his fear was more than he could bear, when the hints and nudges had over-tried his mind. What troubled him most was the thought of the fiddle being drowned. He pictured it at the bottom of the barrel in the dark, a choked and silenced creature rotting out of reach. He saw himself, armed with a stick, everlastingly trying to drag it up, and for ever watching it drift down again to die. It would be like seeing some singing-bird thrust under to drown, not once, but many times before it sank. At least it would have a chance of life if it was given away; it might hear itself speak, might even come to be loved. And if they broke it to bits, at least it would die quick, but he could not endure that rotting by degrees. He would find it hard to sleep when they took it away, but if it lay in the barrel how could he sleep at all? So when Thomas, after his duty visit, rose to go, the old man followed him out into the street. In the dark he felt the fiddle thrust into his hands, and listened dully to the hurried request. "I'll see to it, never fret," he said, when he understood, and moved away with the fiddle under

his coat; but he hadn't gone far before Kit was at his side, begging in anxious tones to have it back. So master and fiddle returned together to the house of hinting and spies. He said to himself that they might take it from him if they could; at least he could never bring himself to send it away.

When Marget had her will of them both at last, it was his habit of old time that delivered them into her hands. A man from the marsh came along the street and hailed Kit through the window as he passed, and Kit rose and ran out as if an angel had beckoned through the pane. Marget heard him chattering in the street, and found the fiddle lying on a chair. He did not see her or even feel her near, stooped like a vulture over its watched-for prey. The strings jarred together as she took the fiddle up, but he never heard them or even turned his head. He went on talking and laughing in the street long and long after the fiddle had disappeared. . . .

The week that followed was just seven days and nights blotted clean out of his tale of life. He never spoke of his loss, nor did he even begin to make a search. He said nothing even in the first shock of finding the fiddle gone. He just stood and stared at the chair where it had lain as one stares at a shell where the spirit has once been. The sense of irrevocable loss was as clear

about the chair as about the heedless dead with their shuttered eyes. Kit had always been queer about furniture, as Thomas knew, and one of Marget's unmeaning chairs said something to him at last.

He did not know whether he spoke or ate during that dead week, but for the most part he was silent and refused his food. Still, his absent-mindedness was an old tale by now, so Marget got little satisfaction out of that. The only difference was that he would not sit in the kitchen any more, and no amount of abuse could fetch him back. Perhaps he was afraid of the chair that was like a coffin in his eyes; at all events, he refused to sit in it again. Instead, he sat in his bedroom on his bed, staring for ever at his magic tree. But there was no magic about it now, because the fiddle had gone away, and without it the fairy glades would never let him in. Yet still he sat there, staring and staring, while the sun climbed the morning hills, touched the house in passing with a golden wing, and fled away to break into colours in the west. Always he sat with his fingers lightly clasped, as if something were lying within them on his knee.

So, as it happened, Marget found her vengeance a poor thing, after all. The scene that she had looked for hung fire and never came off. There

was nothing exciting in the way of pleading and tears; nothing, in fact, except this absolute blank, risen like a fog between her victim and herself. Even the children felt that the situation had fallen flat. Instead of "carrying on," as they had hoped, Gran'pa had been as dull as a dead fish. He hadn't even spoken, nor did he mean to speak. He had not given them any sort of scope for their peculiar powers. Why, you might almost have thought that he didn't even know!

Marget began to brag of her guilt at last, but it was impossible to tell whether he took it in. He did not seem to notice her vivid accounts of how the fiddle had met its end. Sometimes she was exasperated into contradicting her own tales, but as none of them seemed to reach him that did not matter very much. She was chiefly puzzled, however, because he never tried to get the fiddle back. The cheerful hide-and-seek that she had planned couldn't be played because the principal person concerned in it wouldn't take part. He never went to the water-butt to peer into its depths. He never poked about the ashheap or raked the fire. He did not even dig about the garden, as if hoping to find it among the flowers. He knew Marget would never give it as clean a burial as that. All that he did was to shut himself up and stare,

until even she began to feel uneasy in her mind. It would be a poor victory if he was too crushed to care, and in any case she did not want him helpless on her hands. Daft as he was, he was of use to her sometimes, a caretaker for the house when she wanted to be out, a stick to frighten importunate beggars, a hodman to lift a load ; and always a peg upon which to hang her tongue. If she drove him clean crazed, he would be a greater burden than before, and certainly it looked as though that might be the end. So it came about that, after a week, there was a miracle for which he had not even prayed.

He was sitting as usual on his bed, holding between his hands the thing that wasn't there, when down in the kitchen he suddenly heard its voice. He hardly knew it at first—it was so raucous and strange, a voice that wept and screamed, and tried to keep silence but was forced to speak, and was like to destroy itself with its own rage ; yet in all its wrath and pain it was still the voice he loved. He tried to get up to go to its help, but even the beginning of the miracle held him chained. He could only sit still and tremble . . . and wonder and wait. . . .

The children were all together downstairs, and one of them had the fiddle under his chin,

while the red-haired baby, in its trailing skirt, mopped and mowed in the forgotten game. Some of the magic had come back, in spite of the fiddle's terrible voice. They laughed and clapped as they had done in the street, and the baby's face was exalted and set. Even the fiddler had a shadow of Kit's dignity and poise. There was an air of innocent joy strange in the dingy room, a faint recalling of beauty once perceived. Marget, coming in on the little scene, found herself outside it and shut off. There was no part for her in the play they had learned from the daft old man, who knew no better than to go fiddling in the street. All her fierce jealousy was aroused by this faithfulness to his little moment's power. It seemed to her, watching, that he stood between the children and herself, teaching them something she couldn't learn, and taking them where she could not go. For every mother there is a Piper drawing her child away, as even Marget was coming to understand. Perhaps she had seen his reflection in the red-haired baby's face, and suddenly saw it again now. In any case, she brought the show to an end, clouting both player and dancer over the head, and making away with the fiddle up the stair. Through this enveloping cloud Kit heard the door burst open at his back, and saw a shining thing flung quivering on the bed.

He did not move until she had banged out once more, and then after a long while he turned and put out a hand . . . found shape and touch just as they had been, and a sweet answer from every string. . . .

There flashed back on him at once all his vision and his peace. The tree stood up again in the midst of wonderland, and on either side of it the world was wide. His link with its golden solitude was renewed, so that it was his to wander in when he would. And after a while, when the first relief was past, his mind went off down the road that led to the sea.

Always, until they took the fiddle from him, he had been able to see the marsh when he chose, the broad, flat stretches and the clean, soft lines. There, where his mind went, was no muddle of mortar and folks. There was no street with the houses crouching cheek by jowl, muttering secrets into each other's ears ; houses, where strange faces looked in, where dust blew in from the road, where nobody was securely still and safely alone. Here, nobody died or was born, or suffered and rebelled, but the whole street knew and put it into words ; but out there none of these things kept one ever on guard. Nobody heeded one's secrets but the sea, and that never told until it gave up its dead. And the sea never heeded, however folk

behaved. One could run there, while here one could only walk, could shout and sing without troubling the police; while the strains of a fiddle crying out its soul were as free as a gull crying behind a boat.

There was always sun for him when he thought of the marsh, the early-evening sun on road and field. It lay in a great, golden sheet, unbroken as always on a western marsh, stretching out to the far line of the sea. No matter how it rained in the street, in his mind that walked on the marsh there was always sun. The shadows were barely out, and never conquered the gold. And through it along the white road he came to his home.

But often he lingered so long on the road that his mind never reached its goal. The journey alone was an adventure in itself, full of things that could not be missed. There were always growing things to see in the dykes, marsh-buttercups on some pool, purple vetches on some hedge. Somewhere a farm would stand up between its orchard and fields, and meet him always with a new surprise. Houses never outstared you on the marsh, for all its long distances and unbroken sweep. They grew upon you by degrees, coming, yet keeping themselves in reserve, like faces peeping welcome round a porch. Even his own home on the sand's edge,

alone on its shooting tongue of land, stood back in a shelter of fence and tree. In spite of its outstanding position, it was yet serenely aloof. It had the withdrawn unconsciousness of well-bred folk, an unawareness of alien eyes. You might stare at it all day long and it would not blink. At Marget's you were always conscious of the street outside.

Sometimes he did reach the farm and go in, and on those days he was a long time coming back. Often he never passed the meadow gate, but once through that he did not turn until he had reached the house itself. The gate was troublesome to open because of its broken bars, and even in his mind he found it hard to move. Even in his mind he was tired by the time he got to the gate, and so he often stayed on the near side. He could see the house from there plainly enough, and it was always ready when he wished to go in. Things waited for him until he came that way again. The light stayed level and golden on the evening land. The face of the house was steadfast in its peace. No need to hurry and force himself if he was tired. It would always be ready for him when he came.

On the days when he did go in he went with a rush, as if he had jumped the distance that lay between. He went with the whole of his

energy and desire unwasted by the sweetness of the way. There he was, through the meadow and the wicket-gate and the house door, and the miracle was accomplished that brought him home. All the shadows and dim places of the house rested his eyes, and hinted of folks who had never gone away. The scent of his own place was rich with his memories of the past, tangible things that asked for his hand upon their heads. The house was full of that special surprise which belongs to the things we know by heart; the colour and shape of them . . . the feel of suddenly-opened doors . . . the gleam of a brass handle, the shallowness of a step, the forgotten pattern of some ancient stuff. A sense of coolness in a certain room, or of sun, or of firelight on a hearth; atmospheres as full of meaning as if lavender had been stirred. It was strange how you saw things wrong when you were living in a house. You had to leave and go back to it to know.

Of course there were people in the house, but they never spoke to him or he to them. He saw them sitting and talking or going about their work, but he never heard them speak. They never looked at him, either, as he went about. If they had lifted their eyes to look at him he might have been afraid. But as long as they did not look he could watch them in peace,

the folk who had all been part of his own life. His parents were there, his brothers and sisters, his wife and his three sons. The same person at all ages was there, just as he himself was there at every age, so that the house was full and rich and warm. He never thought of it as it was when he left, a chilly case for a wailing violin. As soon as he had gone he filled it again with all who had a right within its walls, and wandered among them, quietly content. He could not touch them or hear their voices or meet their eyes, but he did not want to do any of these things. He could leave the house as it was with only a little ache, but he could not have left pleading looks and hands.

Even on the days when he went into the house he did not always go upstairs, because it meant going too near the dividing-line of which he was afraid. More often, he sauntered through the rooms below, into the sudden whiteness of the dairy or the still little parlour shut like a Sabbath book. Through every window as he passed, a picture flashed that was old to him and yet strange. He saw each of them now as if mounted and set in a frame. Things changed about the house to match his memories as they came, but they never passed beyond a certain point, and every one of them was mellow and sweet with time. Looking back, he saw nothing

that struck him as being new. It was all much too beautiful for that.

When he did get to the bedroom at last, there was always shadow there. He went into the shadow as he went up the stair, and met it when he opened the door. Through the windows, when he looked out, there was no sun on the marsh, only the faint rising of a moon. Somewhere out in the uncertain dark was the quiet plashing of the sea. It was the hour when the world is nothing and some one person is all; when Heaven comes easily, and earth as easily goes. So would death come, he thought, his own good death. Some day he would enter the house for the last time, and climb the stair and open and shut the door. Through the shadows for the last time he would see the things stand out that they had shared, and that perhaps they might find again on the other side. The bits of carpet that their feet had worn; the bed where they had heard each other's breathing in the night; handles and hooks that hand after hand had touched. The sea would be there for the last time, because in Heaven there would be no sea. He would lean out to it, but would only hear it, silver and cool. Then he would let himself summon her out of the dark, because now there would be no need of turning back, and however she came she would be just right,

whether fresh and young or grey and wrinkled and bowed. They would put out their arms to each other, and find each other there. . . . Death, that seemed so dreadful to folk, meant only that.

His dreams grew upon him after the fiddle came back, chiefly because now he very seldom went out. He could not walk very far, and no matter where he went, it was sure to be against the rules. He was forbidden the other houses in the row, and the river-bank and his potterings on the footpath by the wall. If he went out at all, it was on an errand of Marget's to the shops, but he had lost the wish to go out, just as he seemed to have lost the wish to play. In these days his fingers never went unknowingly to the strings. Even now that the fiddle was safe, he went on sitting in his room, and for some unstated reason Marget let him be. So his mind was often away on its travels over the marsh, and the body that was left grew quieter every day. The time seemed to be getting near for that last mounting of the stairs. Those who saw him about then said that he "wouldn't be so long."

And now, after all the days, had come the order of release. Thomas had got the farm in the end, and straight away asked for his father to come home. Not only his mind but his body

could go to the place for which he cried. He could go to a son who would ease his remaining days and a daughter awaiting him with open arms. Of course he was glad to be going, thankful beyond words; too thankful and anxious, indeed, for his content. He could have taken it simply and easily, earlier on, but after all this time it loomed too large. Before, it would have been inevitable and right, but now it seemed to him more than a little strange. As he sat waiting for them to come and take him away, he was conscious of the discomfort and even terror of change. He felt both the reluctant weariness of the old—for whom every shift on the road may be the last—and the fear of the dreamer that his dream may prove untrue. The idealist always shrinks from fulfilment just at the last, and Kit was shrinking and suffering all through. He dreaded the emotional strain through which he would have to pass, longing with shame for his wretched bed and the quiet communion with his tree. Nevertheless he reached forward eagerly to his dream, knowing that he must accept it now, even if he slew both it and himself. Steadily, at the back of his mind, shone the golden glory of the marsh.

He sat patiently, as the old sit who have to husband their strength, but he was filled with a feverish aching to be off. His nervous energy

ebbed continually during this long pause before the start. He had a miserable fear that he might refuse to go when it came to the point. He saw himself making for his room as soon as the trap appeared, an obstinate, desperate old animal slinking to its lair. Marget would curse and hammer on the door, and he would cower on the bed in silence, holding his breath. When they were tired of it they would leave him alone, and his heart would stop shaking itself out of its place. He would hear the trap drive away out of his life, and know in that instant all that he had missed. . . .

He might have steadied his nerves by dozing in his chair, but the children, as usual, kept him from doing that. All the time they were darting in and out to look for the trap, or peering at him round the doors. All about the dark cottage he could see their eyes, excited, curious, mocking and bold. He could hear them speaking of him in rough whispers that always reached him as jeers. For once he wished them busy at their quarrelsome games, but they were much too intent to take themselves out of the way. The dramatic element in Gran'pa held them to the last—the thing that hinted tragedy and scenes. Even the act of driving away would mean more with Gran'pa than with anybody else. They felt instinctively that this was one

of the climaxes of life, and responded eagerly to its thrill. Gran'pa's bundle in its red handkerchief was also a source of thrill, a sort of monster pudding in its cloth. Now and then one of the children emerged and gave the bundle a sly but searching poke. If Gran'pa hadn't been there, they would have had it open at once, and there was always the chance that he might leave it behind. So they stayed, impatient and fidgety but firm, wearing the old man's strength with whisper and stare. There was more to be got out of this than any casual play. Besides, Marget's concluding scene was still to make.

Now he had that first terrible feeling of being suffocated and hemmed in. He couldn't even find a place to rest his eyes, because of the pointing fingers bristling on all sides. There seemed to be faces everywhere as well, and even when he turned to the street one peered at him over the sill. He would have got up and gone outside, but he knew they were there to watch him and would cry him down. Panting, he fixed his hunted gaze on the stair, seeing it in the dark room as a mysterious ladder climbing into peace. It rested him just to look at it and picture where it led. Up above, safe from all the eyes, was a hiding-place for the hunted, shrinking old. The desire to be there grew upon him as he looked, so that he was drawn

irresistibly to his feet. Once up the narrow stair, he would be free of the effort that lay ahead, and the minds that had fastened on his like preying teeth. Now he ached to be there, burned to be there. . . . Something with wings would stand outside the door. . . . He straightened himself, nerving himself to move, and then he saw Marget coming down the stairs.

The silence, breaking the children's speech in half, held a sense of something thrown from a height and smashed. Something always died or was hurt when Marget entered a room. Kit had been too intent to heed her step, but now she was there before him, blocking his way. Where the presence with wings should have been he saw Marget instead, thin, pallid, slatternly, flaring-fringed and slit-eyed. Her tight lips sneered when she saw the old man on his feet, and her knuckles whitened as she gripped the rail. He looked very tall in the low room, and, with bundle and fiddle, very ready to be gone. This was a bitter moment for Marget that snatched her bone from between her teeth. She was ragingly jealous of those who wanted him for himself—wanted before they had tried him, Marget said. They couldn't really be glad of a burden in the house ; they were only pretending, to make other folks look small. She despised them for saddling themselves with the

old man, and hated and mocked them because they did it with smiles. Also she hated Kit for his evident eagerness to go.

"What d'ye think ye're at?" she demanded, looking down at him from the stair. Her malignant face sneered at him out of the gloom, and her voice was full of sounds that troubled his delicate ear.

He braced himself, as he always did when Marget spoke. Even when she looked at him he held himself ready for attack. "Trap'll be round, waint it?" he asked, by way of reply. He leaned his hand on the table to steady himself, looking up. "I reckon trap'll be round afore so long."

She glanced for a moment at his hand, finer, in spite of its age, than any in the house, and there came into her face that hatred of things unknown which had stirred her to fury when the baby danced.

"Nay, then, it just waint!" she rapped out. "I told Bob he needn't hurry himself, getting off. They won't be looking for you yet. Marshfolk is always a week behind everybody else."

"I'll be glad to be off," Kit said dully, with the mechanical patience he had learned at her hands. "I'm getting weary a bit, hanging about. I'd best be off."

"Ay, well," she jibed at him, "you'll have to

bide. I don't know as another hour or two in my house'll do you any harm. You were glad enough on it once, when landlord skifted you out. And it's as cheap sitting as standing, I reckon, even for folks as hasn't the price of a seat. You'd best set down till it's time for you to stir."

"Trap'll be round," Kit repeated doggedly. "I'd reyther stand." He drew in his fingers as if her eyes hurt them, and did his best to straighten his back and set his jaw. The deliverance that was so near gave him courage to fight, in spite of the sinister things in her face and voice. He had yielded in almost every contest yet, and if she had lost where the fiddle was concerned, it was because she had been conquered by something in herself. To sit was to own himself beaten to the end, and would send him shamed to the marsh from a last defeat. And there was always the chance that if he sat he might never get away, because of the shrinking that wrought against him in his heart.

So again he braced himself and said, "I'll stand."

She bent forward towards him from the stair, her chin thrust out at him and her eyes nearly shut. He wanted to push her away and hurry out into the street. He had a feeling that she had trodden that winged thing underfoot, so

that there was no longer a refuge for him upstairs.

"I tellt you trap wouldn't be round just yet."

"Ay, but it will."

"Likely you think I don't know?"

"Nay, not I." Kit looked away.

"I'm a liar, that's what it is?"

"Nay."

"Set down and bide."

"I'll stand."

Suddenly she dropped her strained pose and became all violence and storm, like the wind that gets up out of nowhere on a silent night. Raising herself with a jerk, she flapped down the stair with the noise of a dozen carpet-beaters in full swing. Nobody ever expressed as much as Marget with a pair of down-trodden slippers loose at the heels; yet nobody would keep them when she was gone, pathetic and reverenced by a bed. . . . Kit thought of his winged thing she had beaten down, and looked to see feathers scattered under her feet. Her face was changed both in colour and shape by the unknown terrible things that lived in her brain. Her voice was changed in the same way, and it was her voice that Kit dreaded most, because his ear had the straighter run to his soul. The things that were part of Marget yet not Marget he never could understand. He

was never ready for them, never on his guard. Now she was close to him, bent as if to strike, a trick that had a special horror for the sensitive old man. The children nudged each other and laughed, gloating, yet more than half afraid.

"Stand, will ye—getting in folks' road and showing yourself that smart to be up and off? Ay, I know you're fain to be shot of us at last, and you should be right shammed o' suchlike nastiness, I'm sure. Who'd ha' seen to you all this time if it hadn't been for us? Thomas wanted nowt wi' you, as you know; he'd other fish to fry, had Tom. You'd ha' bin on the parish, that's where you'd ha' bin, and like enough in t' Union itself. Yon's the spot for do-nowts as spend their own brass and then look to spend other folks' as well! Yon's the spot for wastrels and rattlehorns and fancy fiddlers playing in the street. (Eh, but it banged owt, did yon!) It'll be queer if you don't come to it yet, wi' a pound o' bacey at Christmas, and 'Thank ye kindly, master,' all the week. Likely they'll set you going errands, tea and currants and a bit o' lard, or happen your job'll be cleaning out the pigs. Ay, you'll land there yet, as sure as eggs is eggs! Likely you'll think on a bit then about Bob and me."

He stood looking at her without saying a word, fascinated, just as the children were fascinated,

by this exhibition of a ruthless mind. He could feel them gathering closer, magnetised though afraid. The voice that was full of strange things filled all the house, flooded the street and carried down the row, so that folks in passing halted and stared, and the neighbours came running to their doors. "She'll do for him yet," they said to each other when they heard that voice, and there was always the chance that the moment had arrived.

"As for the spot you're off to," she flared on, "I hope you'll find it all you think for, I'm sure. Thomas and his missis'll likely be terble throng wi' you while you're fresh, but wait till they've had you to do for as long as me. Wait till they've gitten you maundering about the place, making a deal o' work wi' your daft-like ways. Agnes Black'll skift you pretty sharp, or she's not the woman I take her for, that's all."

Still he said nothing, paralysed by the flood of sound, and the fierce inflections springing out of her voice like sparks from a cat's back. And then suddenly she changed her method of attack, letting her voice slide down the scale until it was even and chill and full of insidious hints and something that smiled.

"You think it'll be a soft spot, I'll be bound, wi' nowt to do but set fiddling all day. You

reckon you're going back to things as they was, only wi' other folk to see to the work instead o' you. But if you're counting on things being just the same, you're badly wrong. Nowt stands still, and I reckon farms is like the rest. What, I doubt you'll not know the place when you set eyes on it again! It'll have changed a deal in these last two years, same as you've changed a deal yourself. Last man let it down pretty bad; it's a mercy he broke his neck afore so long. Landlord's had a deal to do at it, they say, and Thomas is that set up he's for doing a deal more. Ay, it'll not be the same farm, no more than Kit Sill's the same man. You'll find it out for yourself afore you've been there a week. You'll be nobbut a beggar there, you'll think on, same as here, and owe somebody every bite. It'll be another man's roof over you, as used to be your own. There'll be another chap master, telling you what's what. There'll be a woman for missis as baint no wife o' yours. It'll be bitter as salt water washing at your door. . . ."

"Ay, but it'll be home," Kit said bravely, holding up his head, and wondering what devil taught her his secret fear.

"Yon's what you think—now." For the first time there was a touch of sincerity in her voice. Her cold eyes looked away from him

through the open door. " Them as gangs once shouldn't return. Going back doesn't mend things ; it nobbut spoils what you've had. You'll likely spoil summat if you gang . . . summat you've fettled for yourself. . . . Your sort doesn't live in houses made wi' hands. . . ."

" Summat I've fettled ? " Kit asked, and his voice shook. " Houses not made wi' hands . . .? " He stared at her, terror and pleading in his face, and she knew she had beaten him and turned again with a jeer.

" Nay, I doubt there's summat smittal about daft folks like ye ! I nobbut mean you'll happen wish yourself back wi' Marget afore you've done. Not that you're off yet, so you can just set you down. Folks wi' manners wouldn't be showing themselves that smart."

" I reckon I'll stand."

She shot out a furious hand, thin, with flat finger-tips and curved nails. " Set down ! " she hissed, and he shrank back, but recovered himself again and stood firm.

" I'll stand."

She made a step towards him until their faces almost touched, putting such intensity into the short approach that his strength seemed to ebb from him consciously as he watched. She leaned across the table willing him to obey. " You'll set down," she said. " *You'll set down !* " And

suddenly he gave way as if pulled by a string, crumpling into a shaking heap of bones. He sat down slowly, grasping the fiddle so tight that it hurt his hands, and very slowly the tears ran down his face. For a moment longer she stayed as she was, holding him with her eyes, terrible as a Juggernaut in the way. And then the trap came trundling down the street.

The spell broke at the sound of the wheels, and at once the children were out at the door, tumbling and fighting as they went. As soon as the trap stopped they were round it like flies, fretting the horse and settling on the step. Marget caught the baby by its skirts as it stumbled after the rest, and it set up one of its stupendous howls. Only Kit stayed perfectly still where he was, as if the strength had indeed gone out of his limbs. The stage was set, but the chief actor did not appear. Bob turned in his seat and looked in at the door, and up at his father's window and gave a hail, but Kit never showed that he heard him or tried to stir. The tears ran down his face and he did not so much as lift up a hand. Then Marget snatched at his bundle and thrust it into his arms.

"Ay, well, then gang!" she said in a brutal voice, and watched him tremble and totter to his feet. The red-haired baby fought and shrieked to be down, but she shook the breath out of it

with a mighty jolt. Bob whistled and called again, but the two in the house still looked at each other and paid no heed. They had come too close in that last clash to slip apart again with ease. The hatred on both sides had its mixture of fascination and fear. He felt a helpless dread of a power that beauty could not touch; she, an angry terror of genius out of reach.

One of the children came running back to the door, but still the old man did not move. It seemed as though the leash in which Marget held him had not been slipped. The moment was here that began for him better things, but he did not feel in the least as though the break had come. The sense of relief he had looked for did not ease his heart. She scowled, "Be off with you, then," turning away her head, but still he stood without attempting to go, as motionless as a stock. Never once did he even turn and look out at the door. And then, "I'm obliged to you, Marget," he said at last; "I'm obliged to you, Marget, for all you've done," and shifted the bundle to show a shaky hand.

She brushed it aside with a sharp elbow, but the red came violently into her face. "I'll be bound you're obliged!" she sneered, tossing her head. "You'd ha' been in Queer Street, I reckon, but for us. Eh, well, I hope you'll find

everything to your liking at the farm." The baby opened its mouth again, and she shut it with a jerk. There was a pause, and then she went on, her voice sounding hypnotised and dragged. "You'll mind you can come back if you find as you can't bide ? I want nowt wi' you, an' that's flat, but I reckon I can go on. You'd be best to come back if you find as you can't bide. . . ."

But now he had turned away and was looking eagerly at the door, so that he scarcely seemed to hear her final words. With that look he began his journey to the marsh, to the sun on the long levels that were all of them paths to home. He moved, and at once his feet were over the threshold and he found himself out in the street. He had forgotten Marget as if she had never been, though he had never noticed the snapping of the cord. She did not follow him out, but stayed at the door. The red-haired baby burst into bitter tears.

The neighbours were all looking out along the row, and a little crowd had gathered round the trap. The children still quarrelled and climbed and pushed each other down, or poked and fidgeted the sleepy horse. The road was like a river in the sun, golden beside the black one under the trees, but both of them coming ultimately to the sea. The light dazzled him

as he went out, so that he could hardly see the smiling faces and outstretched hands. Somebody took the bundle from him and put it into the trap, but when they offered to take the fiddle he shook his head. A woman brought a nosegay from a bush beside her door, and pinned it laughingly in his coat. Another pushed a buttered scone into his hand, and asked if she should bring him a cup of tea. It would never be Marget, he heard them say, if she'd thought of setting him up for his ride like that. He shook his head at the tea and stared helplessly at the scone, while they pulled at his arm and wished him luck, or clapped him on the shoulder in farewell. Somebody begged him to give them a tune for the last time, but he was too dazed by the sun to heed what they said. He just stood there, fiddle and scone in hand, staring about him like a puzzled child. Then the parson came along and wished him a pleasant ride, and shook the hand that wasn't holding the scone. Everybody seemed glad for him that he was going home, that he was getting away from Marget, after all. Folks were nearly always glad when they saw others going home. They felt kindlier towards them then than at any other time, he thought. Folks away from home were a kind of public trust. The world was worried about them until they were safely back.

Bob begged the parson to help the old man into the trap, and at once there were a dozen hands hoisting him up the step, holding needlessly to the horse's head, and pulling the children from under the wheels. Kit arrived at his seat a little breathless and pulled about, and felt the fiddle quiver against his coat. He was grateful for the sympathy and help, but he had not expected to be sped by a crowd. He couldn't help shrinking from the cheerful voices and the smiling eyes that made of him a spectacle in the street. They confused him and crossed his thoughts—troubled his perfect journey at the start. He did not know what to do with the buttered scone, and the button-hole worried him dreadfully under the chin. He would have liked to creep quietly out of the house where he had been so sad, and steal silently towards the house where he had been so gay.

The crowd saw that they fretted him at last and drew away, but Bob still talked to the parson over the wheel. The old man looked back up the street, and saw the village radiant in the sun, the white wall of the school like a snow-palace in its midst, and the church-tower high and sharp against the sky. He looked up at the trees and saw the leafy roof thick and green and still, and the doors of many mansions among the boughs. "Houses not made wi'

hands," he said to himself, and wondered where he had heard the words. He looked at the cottages, with their porches and worn steps, their shaded windows and grey walls, their climbing roses and sagging, slated roofs. And for a long moment he looked at his own window which held the enchantment of the tree. From his window on the marsh he would see no trees, neither magic ones on a velvet sward nor giants bent into bondage by the gale. There would be nothing before his eyes which had been straitened so long but the long distances of the sands and the long pathways of the sea.

Bob sat up and put his hand on the whip, and saw the onlookers black as ink against the swimming gold of the road. Kit's hat was over his eyes, so that he did not see Marget at the wheel until she spoke. Then he looked and saw her white face and her fringe, and the red head of the baby glowing in the light. "Think on you can come back," she said in her hard tones, and repeated it as they slowly drew away. He nodded vaguely by way of reply, wondering why she talked of coming back when he was not yet conscious of being gone, and Bob said hurriedly, "Ay, ay, he knows," and flourished the ragged whip. The horse gathered itself into a slow trot, and Marget fell back out of sight. The river that was yet road began to

swim past, lined with waving figures on its banks. They lurched away straight into the eye of the sun, and the folk came back to the street to watch them go. Kit looked a very old man indeed from behind, and Bob's shoulders seemed tired and slack. They were like weary folk hurrying into the light to be made young and strong. The swing of the cart behind the rolling horse gave them the air of going very fast. Those who were left talking in the street began to dispute whether the old man would look round. "Nay, he's over glad to be off," said one; "he'll look round none, will the old chap, not he!" And another said, "He's not found it that grand he'll risk his neck for it, I'll swear!" But a woman said, "We've had many a crack together, him and me"; and another said, "He makes his own things to suit himself with, does Kit."

They watched the trap to the end of the street, past the little white rows that had steps up to the doors, and the woodyard and the smithy and the farmhouse by the bridge, and still Kit did not turn. The trap gave a sudden swerve, and they could see the buttered scone held tightly in his hand. Bob leaned towards him and spoke, but the old man gave no sign of reply.

And then just at the very last he turned,

when another minute would have blotted him out. All he could see now was the tunnel of the trees, with the houses showing dimly along the side. He had thought himself free without so much as a pang, but somewhere a link was holding, after all. Something was left behind in the village street, something that would not follow, that could not come. He felt the tug at his heart and looked back, though it was too late to do anything but look. It passed as soon as the turn was passed, and his heart lifted, thinking itself loosed. Nevertheless, something was gone that he might not find again—something that he had made in prison, and might not take away.

III

ONCE they were past the turn, Bob let the horse slip into a walk, and moved in his seat with something like relief. Now they were out of reach of the following eyes, and especially of Marget's terrible eyes. Even they, piercing as they were, could not bore through stone and rising earth. The remains of his youth awoke at this touch of adventure and escape, and he looked about him from side to side, and whistled as if compelled by the rhythm of the hoofs. The old man stirred, too, and looked about, and suddenly, with a half-mechanical lifting of the hand, he began to eat his buttered scone. He forgot it again, however, after a couple of bites, because his memories crowded in too fast.

They came to the twilight spot on the river bank where he had played until Marget found him out, but he barely looked at it as he drove past. He was a different person to-day from the shabby fiddler who had played through stolen hours to an idle ring. A charm had begun to work after he reached the turn, so

"Houses never outstared you on the marsh"

"Shore-grasses never really still"

that he was no longer the down-trodden creature rated by a shrew. Now he was just the simple old man who had lived at the sea's edge with a fiddle under his arm. Marget's voice was no longer in his ears, but the voice of the peewit and gull and the rush of the incoming tide. And Bob, too, was changed from a dull epitome of mistakes to a soul who remembered the pride and spring of life. If Kit had turned to look at him just then, he would have seen him a moment in his splendid youth, with the wrestler's steady eye and muscular grace. He remembered him conqueror in many a ring, and wondered what had become of his cups and belts. They were not at the cottage, he felt sure of that. Marget would have been sure to say they were "in the road," and at least he would have seen the children using them in their play. Bob's exploits were never mentioned in that house, because Marget was of opinion that wrestling was low. Probably the trophies had gone long since to provide other things more necessary if less proud. But in the old days there had been a grand show of them on the dresser at the farm, polished glories that, when the dusk came, made silver points of light both above and within the oak.

The river still ran by them on the left, and beyond it was the climbing sweep of the park,

with the belts of wood binding it east and west. Once, coming home in the dawn from a dance on the far side, he had found a little fawn in a dim glade. It was said to be lucky to find a new-born fawn. Over the hill-top the wishing-trees used to stand, but he had never been back there since they were cut down. Things couldn't alter as long as you didn't go back. They stayed the same while you kept them so in your mind. . . . The further wood was slowly growing black, because of the hill between it and the west. At the foot of the wood was the long, clean-coloured house, with its pillars and flat windows and wide, stately steps. Kit saw his own life clearly when he looked at the house, because the lives within and around the house were bound together like a bundle of sticks. Through all his memories the romance of a higher class ran like a silken thread through a homespun cloth. High and low, they had seen together so much that was the same. They had watched death and life changing the countryside, and awakened each morning to the gift of the same day. They had done many things together, too, and where one had done them alone, the one that looked on seemed still to have his share. Glancing back from a great age, it was hard to tell where the lives really drew apart. Rich or poor, they belonged to the

same scheme of things, and had their final share in the same earth.

He could not have told you how many squires he had known. The old family had died off fast, and in the multitude of their names he could not be certain which had gone churchwards first. He was always put to it when asked to say whether Philip Edmund or Edmund John had died before the succession honours were barely his; whether John Philip or merely John had lived to the striking age of fifty-one. One who had lived to be really old had died when Kit was a lad; a fine, old-fashioned autocrat who knew his place. Folks saluted on all sides when he walked up the street, and the women had had to go in and shut their doors. Perhaps he was at his best in the church over the hill, with its hacked Crusader monument and its floor paved with names. All who served him had to come to church, wearing the livery of their class. Even the keepers from over the sands had to be there, crossing the river-channel when they could. The head keeper wore a scarlet coat, he thought, and the others green, and the men with the hound-dogs, blue. Coachmen and grooms came in livery, too, with buttons that shone like little moving moons. Through the deep, diamond-paned windows you could see the churchyard full of gold laburnum trees, and old

houses with their feet among the tombs, and luminous patches of morning sky. Those who had been rich or poor in their lives shared the gold of the laburnum equally in death. Nobody nodded in the sermon under the Squire's eye, or moved a foot to the aisle until he had left the church.

Now they were passing the agent's house on the right, a creepered dwelling facing river and hill. It was many a long year since he had been inside, but a certain room was always clear in his mind. He had gone to ask for the farm when his father died, and taken with him the lass he meant to wed. They had sat stiffly on the leather chairs, speaking their parts as bravely as they could. Ann had been far the smarter of the two, spoken up better and known what she was about. Likely enough they had got the farm because of her, but he wasn't the only man who had to own to that. She was always the better horse, as everybody knew. . . .

Now, when he thought of the room, it was like a picture in a book, and the shy young couple seemed like pictures, too. Yet all his life he had thought of Ann as she was then, with her dark stuff gown and the colour bright in her cheeks, and his real self was still that daft young man, twisting his cap on the edge of an office chair. Folks said you lived your life before you were

twenty-five, and that all the rest was simply looking back. Marget would have it he had changed, but change couldn't touch that picture in his mind. Ann and Kit still sat on their leather chairs, smiling at him, steadfastly alive.

The plantation further on which he had seen cut down, was grown again just as tall and thick. The road was dark and damp under the trees, cool in summer and muddy in the wet. Down this hill he had once seen timber-waggons running away. It must have been winter because it had snowed in the night, and the sky was black and the road just sprinkled white. The river was the colour of the blade of an axe, and running as if it was out of control, too. The children were coming from school when the first waggon got away, with a team of three horses and a load of larch. The long, clean poles, straight as a ship's masts, swung like an anchored boat to the incoming tide. The driver was running close in front of the wheel, lying back on the reins and shouting all the way. The children scattered like feathers thrashed from a bed, and collected again to watch the waggon take the turn, skidding and swinging broadways to the road. The other waggon braked along the wall, driving a furrow in mortar and moss and fern. Kit remembered it all as if it had been last week,—the fine bite in the air and the

thundering hoofs, the musical clink of the brasses and the fierce clanking of the chains, the swing and heave and weight and length of the load, the great horses, the nerve and strength of the men. . . . When you were old you liked to think of these things, to remember that not everybody grew old at the same time. Once he had seen Bob lift a trap through a gate with the help of the cowman from the Hall. The broad shoulders and strong wrists had raised the wheels like toys, and the Squire had sat in the trap above their heads and laughed. And there were still men to do these things though Bob had fallen out. Youth was still in the world, and hands were firm on a rein. . . .

Bob pulled up on the bridge before he turned to the marsh, to let him look at the river from either side. And first he looked at it sliding through the park, between grass banks and bulrushes and dreaming, stooping trees. Through the trees he saw flashes of red and white that were cattle coming down to drink, and where the sun had left the water black there was the sudden whiteness of still swans. The ghosts of themselves gleamed at them from beneath, and when the cattle stooped to drink there would be coloured cattle in the water, too. The fish were rising as the shadows grew, stirring the river with their delicate rings. It was hard to re-

nember in the peace that all water had its toll, even this calm dreamer shedding its gold coat. Yet it, too, had its weeds that could drag a swimmer down, its black spot of tradition where the brothers had been drowned, pools where the lonely had sought a greater solitude still. But to-night the peace of the evening was glad peace, because of the Tyranny of Marget overpast.

On one side of the bridge the river was making ready for the night, but on the other it was still sunny and awake. It had still to get out on to the sands, to catch the last drop of gold as it fell from the lingering day. There were no bridges or banks to gather it into shade, or trees that hushed the water with shadow long before the sun was under the sea. Once safely out it ran in a glinting length in which nothing was mirrored but the sky. This was the river he knew best, that was never afraid of the lonely flat or the Terrible Friend that was the tide. In the park and the village it was cluttered and darkened by the growing things on its banks, like the minds of folks who lived in a close street. Here, on the edge of the world, nobody's shadow could tread on your heels. He drew a breath of relief as they turned for the moss-road, and took another bite from his buttered scone.

The moss-road, running close beside the sands, with the sea-wall on its left like a ruled fence,

had grassy borders dropping to grass-grown dykes. Beyond the hedge to the right the fields lay level and square, planned for the easy handling of the plough. The long lines of the roots were at right angles to the long line of the road, and when there was wind over the young corn it billowed across it in unbroken waves. Marsh and sands were full of these darting lines with their sense of flight, as if they were arrows shot from the bow of the eye.

Dropping behind them to the south was the hamlet above the beach that had once been known as a port. All its white faces were snowy in the sun, but there were no sails slipping to rest in front of it to-day. Yet it was not so long since ships had sailed from there to trade with Spain. Kit remembered the old merchant who had owned the ships, with his comb of white hair, round spectacles and benevolent grey eyes. The Spanish trade had died with him, and seemed like a fairy tale to-day. He had been everybody's friend who needed a friend, and there had been hands in his pockets all his life.

The sky in front of them seemed packed to the sun with hills, the crowded purple mountains threaded with the dales. They looked empty as hills of the moon from across the bay, but Kit had many friends along their flanks. The folk there knew to the full what winter meant, and

rain falling like rods from the high tops, and nights that were endless, whether wild or still, and becks at the flood and the great drama of the snow. From the marsh the hills were soft as blue clouds poised light on each other's backs, but Kit knew that their bodies were strong soil and their bones of iron. He knew the rough grass that clothed them as Nebuchadnezzar was clothed with hair. He knew the exalted joy of mounting on their backs, like riding some mighty horse across the earth. He knew their crag-faces and screes, their smooth, green slides and rocky ghylls. He knew their moorland and moss-hags, their bog-pools and lost tarns. He knew the lone, white-fronted farms, and the becks rushing at their doors. And in the midst of the loneliness he had only to climb some peak, and find himself at home because looking out to sea.

He had often gone up to play in the dales, and of all his dances he had liked these best. First of all came the journey, which was always an adventure in itself. Some sudden turn from the high road to the north, and he was plunged in a twisting lane between the hills. Already, perhaps, it would be dusk, because of the barrier to the west, which grew and darkened and grew as the shadows gathered and trailed. He himself was small as a gnat on the thread of road,

between the monsters soaring on either side. There would be water talking out of the shadows here and there, hidden streams and falls with the last light flashing on their manes. Always he heard the water-talk when he went into the dales, because it was so different from the voice of his own sea. And, greater than the water, was the stillness, that nothing was ever big enough to break, neither the shrill dogs nor the shepherds' whistle nor the cry of the sheep. Even thunder and wind could only trouble it for a time, like the floating of furious smoke across a glass. Behind them you felt the imperturbable patience of a greater strength. It was a different stillness from the empty silences of the marsh. It was the live stillness of great bodies, crowded side by side, whom even Nature seemed powerless to stir.

His journey's end was always some farmhouse, where he had a meal before starting for the dance. From these dwellings, which he often saw only by night, he carried pictures of shadowy rafters and firelit walls, blind staircases to which he trusted himself as to a horse knowing its way, and clean, bare rooms upstairs where a lighted candle seemed to bring the mountains into the house itself. After the meal he groped his way at a lantern's tail to the festive barn. He could trace the hedges by the

shadowy line along their tops, and smell the smell of earth that is damp in the night, and hear the sheep-wail out of the void. And then, in the midst of the dark, that was either smooth blackness or full of looming shapes, the door of the barn would open a yellow port-hole to the night. He left the night with regret, although he grew in stature as he went in, and the fiddle, too, increased in weight and power. Out in the dale it had seemed a tinkling thing, but once inside its voice was proud and strong. On the rough platform or the corner chair where they spent the night, he and his fiddle came proudly into their own.

Sometimes he got to the barn first and had time to look about the great, bare place that to-night was the heart of the dale. The knotted floor was well swept, and slippery with shredded wax. Forms were set along the walls, with clean paper at their backs, and high above that were the glistening, steady lamps. There were food and drink on tables at the end, white cloths and bright tea-urns and polished cups and plates. Far over all was the darkness of the roof, untouched by the light as the dale through the big doors. Outside the door, the opening had shone gold; on this, it was only a gaping square of black.

But the lads and lasses were waiting, as a rule,

clear-skinned, dark-haired folk with still, grey eyes, and feet that were tapping the floor before he had tuned. He thought about them as he played with a steady swing, of their lives and the lives that had made them what they were. He thought of their old names, and the way they bred so true to type and strain. He thought of the long silences in which they spent their days, of their courtesies and roughnesses, their simple-mindedness and reserve, their inherited knowledge of the lonely places of the earth. He thought of their houses, with rafters and wide hearths, their worn flags and sudden steps, their deep sills and oak stairs. He thought of the windows which, at break of day, held pictures never seen on any wall. He thought of the hills where they walked, that were rich with Viking names and cradled the Viking dead. He thought of the secrets of the hills, of their mysterious dangers and almost-forgotten rites. It was a hundred years, perhaps, since they lighted the last fire on Baal's Hill; less than seventy since the wildfire had gone round. The fire-charmers were barely dead, or the tooth-charmers, or the old women who knew the herbs. Folk lived long in the dales, and the old secrets longer still. Gods were not of necessity fled because the sacrifice was past. There was still that feeling up in the wastes that out of nothing

something might appear. There were lakes in which drowned bodies never rose, and terrible winds which could slay you in a breath. Folks said there were spirits who hated the railways crossing the moors, and were glad when the big trains came to harm in the night. Things were as strange as when there were devils on Cross Fell, and the idol lay in its bed at Kirkby Thore. The dale-folk were wonderful to Kit, because of the mysteries in their blood, but often he found them rather pitiful, too. Often they seemed to him, as he played, like children dancing in a lighted cave. He thought of the cave as set in a blackened void, with giants of darkness stooping over its roof. The folk in the cave were not afraid, because for them the cave was the whole world. So heedless they seemed, and young, so fleet-passing and yet so strong. Death slew them, and yet they came in the same form, with the same faces and voices and transmitted ways. Life must surely be stronger than death, while the stamp of it stood so long. . . .

When he forgot the cave he thought of their home-going in the dawn, of lights in misty shippons and the ivory gleam of milk. The mountains were fresh-made again, gentle as all new-born things. He saw the folks sitting at their meals, and heard them call to each other in the yards. He saw them dipping and clipping

year by year, or high and alone with their dogs among the drifts. He thought of them kneeling in the little church, with Philip, Lord Wharton's Prayer-Books in their hands. He thought of bridals under the axe-hewn beams, of corpse-roads over the fells, and arvel-bread. . . .

Suddenly Bob spoke, making him start, for there had been years as well as miles between them as they drove. "You'll be right suited to be back," he said, flicking the dull horse with a listless whip. "It was a sad pity you ever had to quit."

Kit said "Ay, ay," rather vaguely, for he wanted to be left alone with his thoughts. Bob had already lost the exhilaration of setting out, and there was no place for this drooping failure in Kit's mind. Besides, here on the marsh the past was so alive that voices barely found their way to his ear. No human speech, indeed, could have the colour and flow and flight of this epic spoken by his own soul. There was wistfulness in his memories but they were not sad, because only evil memories are sad. Beauty grows like a rose over every other, even pain; perhaps especially over pain. While he walked in his memories he was young and brave, unclogged by poverty, uncrippled by age. And how, in any case, could he be sad, who was going at long last to his home?

"They wanted you right off," Bob went on. "They never give me no peace till I'd fixed a day."

"They're right kind," Kit murmured, not thinking of them at all. He took another bite of the scone and tried to see the land around, instead of lighted caves and valleys in the dawn. "I think a deal o' the spot," he added, after a while. "I doubt I'd got too old to change."

"Ay, but there's changes at the farm an' all," Bob said, with a note of warning in his voice. "'Tisn't in nature for things to stop the same. There's bound to be changes when different folks get hold."

Kit said "Ay, ay," again, and munched stolidly at the scone. Marget had said things like that, and now she was saying them again through Bob. But he had left Marget ever so far behind, and out on the marsh she could not make him afraid. There couldn't be changes in the place where he was at peace, because permanence was the essence of all peace. Bob should have known that, but Bob had forgotten peace. Bob, as his shoulders dropped, had found Marget still at his back. Not even on the marsh could Bob escape.

"'Tisn't in nature," Bob was saying again. "Folks is that different, they're bound to make things different, too." All his sentences seemed

like tame echoes of Marget's biting speech. "I don't know as it ever does for folks to gang back."

"Ay, well, I can nobbut try," Kit said, sitting up and speaking with sudden force. "As for the changes you're making out, I reckon they waint bite. There's nowt can change that much in a couple o' years, not things as is fairly set. There's no change on the marsh as I can see, for all the sea's frettin' at it still; and danged if Jim Bell grandmother bedstead baint mendin' yon fence yet!"

"Marsh don't change overmuch, but it changes, all the same. What, they say, don't they, as it all come out o' the sea? Yon's change enough, surely, when you come to think on? And folks change a deal faster than land and suchlike. I reckon you've changed yourself, these last two years."

They were only Marget's words, like the rest, but just for the moment they struck a little chill. It was likely enough that he had altered, as they said, when you came to think what those two years had meant. He had thought himself at the end of change when he left the farm, except for the change that is the beginning of things. If there were any currents left in his life's stream, they had seemed too weak to carry him off his feet; yet now they were stirring and

lifting him again. But if it was true that there were changes in himself, they could only be superficial, after all. Marget's branding-iron could not permanently have disfigured his soul. At least he was sure that folks going home turned again into their old selves. When they went in at the door they forgot at once everything that had pushed its way in between. The real things were there, as they found; the real selves, the real souls. The rest was incidental as garments flung away. The old feeling took them that they were looking forward instead of back, happy because of the future instead of the past. Yet really they were happier than they had been before, because of the extra gladness of coming home. They would hardly know themselves when they looked in the glass, because the faces and feelings did not match. The place was full of things that took them back—like the smell and feel of things, and the sun on the floor. No matter what life had managed to do to them, it faded now. These were the real things where their real selves had stayed. They were the same, in spite of the years, abidingly, patiently, blessedly the same.

He was so certain about it all that he spoke even more forcibly than he had done before. "I'd not change to the marsh if I was dead and riz!" he said. "I'd not change to the farm if

Squire offered me the Hall. And I'd be Kit Sill and for evermore Kit Sill, if I was coming from Heaven an' nobbut from next door ! "

Bob said drearily that likely his father knew his own business best. His own belief in the ultimate rightness of things had long since gone by the board, and he found it strange that Kit's should be lingering still. The artist's faith that yet all things shall be well had flamed for only a period in Bob. Marget had soon set herself to work to trample it out. Yet here was old Kit still brandishing the torch. But then Kit had only suffered for the space of a couple of years.

In spite of his admission, however, he seemed unable to let the subject drop. It was almost as if Marget must be whispering into his ear. " You'll think on Marget said you could come back ? " he wandered on. " She's likely taken to you a deal better than I thought. If happen you don't feel like settling at the farm, you've nobbut to say the word and come back."

" I'll settle, thank ye," Kit said. " I will that." Bob ought to have known, he thought, that it was simply a waste of time to talk like that. Marget was an outsider, of course, but Bob had once belonged. " Don't fret yourself," he said. " I'll settle all right. I'll bide."

" Farm's that smart it don't know itself," Bob said, " what wi' new paint and paper and

furniture as good as Squire's. What, there's a rug afore t'kitchen fire as'd likely make a carpet at our spot, I'm sure! There's curtains to all the winders—some on 'em real lace; and parlour's over grand to set in by a deal. They've been to a sight o' pains fixing your old room an' all. You'd think as the King hisself was coming to stop on the marsh."

Kit listened to him, but only with half an ear, wondering why Bob should suddenly have so much to say. He knew nothing about the house of which Bob spoke, and didn't want to know anything, if it came to that. The house he was going to see to-day was quite a different spot. It was empty and shabby and rather short of brass, but it was full of the soft tones that make for peace. There was no colour in it that the sun had never kissed, or wood that the years had not mellowed in its place. The worn surfaces knew his hand, and the uneven flooring had never troubled his feet. What, there was a sunk flag at the kitchen door that had never tripped his toe in fifty years! . . .

"Thomas mun ha' done well for himself," Bob was drawling at his side. "He mun ha' laid by a deal more than we ever thought. I reckon he could ha' taken the farm all right yon time as they went and turned you out. But they said the lass wasn't for wedding him just

then, and he was feared he'd loss her if he come away. She should think shame of herself, she should, for putting us all about."

"Nay, nay," Kit put in, "she did right to take her time. It's an easy enough business getting wed, but none so easy to bear wi' when it's done. And she's a good lass, they say, for all she give him sneck-posset at the start. She'll do well for me, Thomas said; she'll see to me like her own. I reckon I waint come off so badly, after all."

Bob thought gloomily of the bearing with things which he had brought upon himself, and of the wife that was neither a good lass nor kind, but at the same time some remnant of feeling ranged him on Marget's side. He, too, couldn't help feeling sore because the old man was going away. He was not jealous as she was jealous, because her bone was being touched, but it hurt him that others should do for his father what he wanted to do himself. It was his place to be at the farm and to give his father a home, and, Marget apart, it would have been his pleasure as well. But both duty and pleasure were in this case out of reach, and it was his younger brother who had the right, as well as the place and the brass and the luck of a kindly wife. The last humiliation was that he should be here, driving the old man to the home that he preferred. Thomas had

offered to fetch his father himself, but Bob's pride had suddenly flickered, and he had refused. Now, however, he cursed himself for not letting Thomas have his way, because it seemed that he came with his failure in his hand—with a tacit admission that he had nothing to give. He wondered if Kit thought of it like that, and felt the slow blood rise and burn his cheek.

He tried to comfort himself with the thought that things would be easier at home, now that the burden and bugbear had gone away. Of course, they would miss the money to some extent, but there would be one mouth less to feed, as well as more room in the kitchen and less friction—perhaps—at meals. Marget would have no more tales to tell him at night of the bother his father had given her in the day. He would not have to lie in the dark and listen to his crimes—how he had torn his jacket or got lost, or sniffed at his pudding or broken a chair. He would not hear her beating the old man with her tongue, in default of the blows that she dealt her weaker prey. And at least he would be free of the dread that tragedy might be the end—some sudden violence, perhaps, or the river under the trees. He could sleep now without hearing the old man's cough; it would be somebody else's job to see to that. He could go to work

unhaunted by the old man's boots, gaping and sagging and leaking in the wet. Thomas would see to the boots and Agnes to the cough, and to other little things like socks and shirts. Kit would be housed and fed as he had not been for years, and he could play his fiddle again on his old marsh. Bob knew what that special deprivation must have meant; he was true enough son of Kit to guess at that. Things seemed to be looking up for them all round, and he knew he ought to be glad if he couldn't be proud. At least the burden was off the failure's back, which had more than enough to carry, as it was. But all that he really felt was jealous shame, and a hope that Thomas, too, might somehow fail.

He need not have been afraid, however, that Kit was despising him in his heart. He had forgotten him completely as he drove, as well as the ghost of Marget at his back. If he thought of him at all, it was as a boy, trudging to school or running about the marsh. Sometimes, indeed, he went back so far that Bob had not even begun to exist. Perhaps he lingered longest at that stage, because the mind is coming full circle at the last. Youth must inherit heaven as well as the earth, because most of us are made young again at the end. Bob's words came out of a mist that covered the

immediate past, like the gulls he had often heard crying over a foggy sea. He slipped right away from it through the years, as the swifts dipped and dropped about the steeple under the hill. But no matter where he was, the things around him were always good. The steady sun warmed him and the air was cool in his throat. His eyes rested themselves on hedge and dyke, and line upon long line of sand ; but all the time he saw as much with his heart as with his eyes.

All the days that had found him on that road were present with him to-night ;—golden days, such as this, and the quiet, grey days that seemed scarcely to draw a breath from dawn to dusk. On those days the whole world was grey, not as if hidden by a veil, but grey-washed by a broad yet feathery brush. Wet days, many and long, when the rain blowing in from the sea was as level as the sun ; mornings, fiercely cold, with the north wind dropping straight from the high snows ; evenings, drenched with mist and haunted by pale sheaves, peering over the road at the lapping tide. Moons world without end he had seen stand over the marsh, the first moon of the year, light and thin as the edge of a tossed coin, to the great harvest moon that was not like an English moon at all. There was something in the nature of Divine revelation about the moon that came with the sheaves, a touch of

the mystical meaning that shone so plain from the Bethlehem Star. It was not only that it was so big and bright, as if it had really eaten all the rest. It had a tremendous personality of its own, a calm force that could be felt. You were never alone on the marsh while a moon walked with you there ; but when the harvest moon rose up, it was like a majestic stranger in a room.

Days of storm, when he had to fight his way at his horse's head ; and whirling snow-days, with the ditches level with the road. Summer, when the tall grasses almost hid the dykes, and the tall hedges all but hid the fields. Spring, with a wail beside that of the curlew in the air, and lambs like new flowers all over the coloured carpet by the sea.

Nights, too, that would never in any world come back to him again. . . . and dawns when, returning from some dance, he had run from the sun that was hunting him over the hill. Out to sea all was still dark, and the road before him unsubstantial as a cloud. There might be sea to each side of him for all he knew, for land that has once belonged to the sea has always the feeling of sea-ground in the night. The music he had made was still in his brain, making itself again to the horse's hoofs and the beat of a hidden train along the coast. The fiddle inside his coat was thrilling and singing like his

brain. Not for long after they reached home would either of them be still.

And then, over the chain that cuts England in two, bursting out over the top like a man who rushes the last few feet of a climb, the sun took the marsh and the Lake mountains in its stride. Out of the blotted dusk soft, nebulous shapes arose. Faint colour came into the grass, faint silver into a stream. Life flowed into the faintly-living earth, and grew fuller and faster as it moved. He saw the cattle stand up, and the sheep come away from the hedges that were full of the questioning twitter of the birds. The larks went up from the still-shadowy fields, racing the sun for the earliest word with God. There was a gleam of marsh-marigolds in the dykes, though still unburnished and dim. In all the waking world he and his horse alone were sinking into sleep, and though the river was still sombre when he reached its banks, it was drawing in light each moment from the sky. The farm, when he saw it at last, seemed painted for him against the tide, with the yew a black finger against a whitened wall. All the air about it was still and sunshot and transparent and pure. Suddenly he saw a hand open a window upstairs, and knew that his wife had heard him on the road.

Often enough, if the night was very wild, he

found her waiting for him at the gate of the yard. The tide would be thundering and swirling behind the bank, swaying and swishing as if pent in a great, shaken pot. The waves tearing across the bay were swifter than any boat, and the shock of them striking the bank was like the shock of rolled logs against the gates of the earth. In the black dark that was full of a million spouts the showers of spray shot up to meet the rain. It was hard to tell where the tide really stopped, even with that frustrated roar at the sea-wall. Any step, so it seemed, might find them the black flood at their very feet. They had known it steal its way into the garden before now; into the yard, and, once only, into the house. In that upstairs room where his dream always came to an end, they had sat and listened to the water surging below. They could hear the furniture bumping like anchored boats, and the water slapping and gurgling at the stair. They had scarcely said a word to each other all the time, because of the wind that was howling round the house. There might have been only one building in the world, and the wind sworn to tear it down. All they could do was to sit and wait and wonder when the gale would allow the tide to turn. They were not really afraid of the raving and threshing of the sea, scarcely more than a man is afraid

of the bark of his own dog. They barely troubled themselves to guess where the rising water might end. They did not picture the room grown black with the drowned light, and filled like a vault until the ceiling was reached. . . .

This was the Great Storm, but there were many lesser ones, when, gripping each other while he clung to the horse, they groped to the stable by the lantern swung on her arm. The gulls would be screaming in clouds above their heads, but the dark and the wind hid their wild swinging and their cries. Only when the late dawn began and the bigger water drew back, they would see them sweeping and plunging about the house, filling the garden with curving shadows and faint gleams of feathered white. . . .

They did not meet a soul as they jogged along ; none at least, that Bob was able to see. At intervals, somebody hailed them from a field, and the voice, after reaching them, travelled out on the sand. Hard, brown hands went up over eyes that saw the trap all black against the gold. Everybody on the marsh knew that Kit was coming home, and most would have liked a look at him and a word. If all tales were true, he must be as glad as a crowned king, and they would have liked to tell him they were glad as well. Besides, the folks at home

would be sure to ask how he was, and whether he looked half-clemmed, as it was said. Ay, and if he was getting daft, as Marget had put about, and whether the same old fiddle was fiddling still. But the trap went on, and the questions remained unsolved. Only Bob's dull voice came back to them over the marsh.

The old man did not hear the hails, because he was busy listening to other talk. Now he was nodding his head at all manner of folk, and stretching down his hand for a hearty shake. Sometimes he checked the trap with a tug at the rein, and kept Bob waiting while he had a crack with this body and then with that. Bob thought he was taking a look round, and let the old man sit as long as he liked, but Kit was doing a great deal more than look. He was puzzled to find so many folk out and about on the marsh at the same time, but he was more than pleased to set eyes on them again. Every single one of them wanted a crack with the old man who was so terribly busy going home, and his own tongue was as lish as most, for the matter of that—so lish that it wouldn't rest quiet in his mouth. It had been stiff and frozen for many a long month, but now it was getting away like a beck in spate. He seemed to himself to be talking very loud, and to laugh a great deal, and to hear the other folks talking like a lot of

crows. It was surely a rare stroke of luck that so many should be about just when old Fiddlin' Kit was busy coming home! He found it as stimulating as any dance, with figures whirling over a crowded floor. The fiddle was quivering under his coat, as it always did at once if he raised his voice. He would have taken it out and played the folk a tune, but he was never finished with all he wanted to say. Bob was forgotten completely, but he did not mind, because he saw and heard nobody but the peewit and the gull.

Now here was Jardine, the hound-man from the Hall, who had only one hand and made shift for another with an iron hook. He had shot off his own hand when he was a lad, but he had gone on using a gun as well as before. There were hounds waiting behind him as he paused in the road, low hounds with bowed legs and fine heads, drooping ears and asking, human eyes. Long ago Jardine had got blood-poisoning feeding the pack, but Kit had quite forgotten that he was dead. There could be no real death on the night of his coming home—certainly not such a dreadful death as that. Besides, it was easy to see the man was there alive, gaitered and grey-whiskered and thin-faced and light-eyed. And of course there were the asking dogs at his heel; the dogs were

witness enough that he was alive. Yet old Forward was dead, and Rosebud, and King's Own. . . . They had been dead for years, and if they hunted still it was only at nights. . . . There were other dogs, too, with Jardine and the pack; a pointer, for instance, somewhere in the crowd. Kit was quite pleased to see the brown and white sporting dog which nobody fancied now. Suddenly, with a thrill, he noticed a sheep-dog of his own, with a snowy patch like a star on its black chest. It did not seem to know he was in the trap, and none of the dogs paid any attention to the horse. There was a bobtail, too, full of happy smiles, and a slim little toy that had saved the Hall in a fire. Jardine had a gun on his left shoulder and a couple of rabbits hanging from his hook, and it did not seem strange in the least that he should have gone out shooting with that doggy train. He slung the rabbits into the trap by way of a welcome to old Kit, and the fiddler thanked him and nodded as he drove away. It pleased him that he should have something of the sort to carry home, and though he could not see the rabbits at his feet, he felt the weight of their bodies on his boots.

He had another long talk with Martin Hinde, who had a pedigree shorthorn herd at Withergill. Kit had muddled his stock as he had muddled

everything else, but he loved the romance of a big shorthorn success. He had loved the stock, too, when it stayed in his mind, and could stand entranced round a cattle-ring as long as most. It seemed to him, after a while, that he got down into the road, and argued with Martin about a cow just over the fence, while the cow cropped on stolidly without ever raising her head. They talked of Royals and Royal Lancashires and of local winners at the great shows; of breeders and auctioneers, and great sires whose pedigrees they knew better than their own. They commented on the passing of the ancient hour-glass at sales, and began to grow heated and loud-voiced over dual purpose and Scotch blood. They even fought the old Booth and Bates battle over again, roaring and waving sticks and dragging in *Bracelets* and *Duchesses* by the hair. Kit fancied that he could see the shadowy majesties of the herd, looming along the road at Martin's back. Even as shadows they gave an impression of weight, of solid strength in their huge bodies and great, scornful heads, that would have been noble but for the sullen, brooding eyes. But all that Bob saw was empty marsh and sand, and an old man sitting vacantly in a trap, with the last of a buttered scone in his still hand.

They overtook Mrs. Holliday as they went,

trudging home with a basket on her arm. Kit suggested that they should stop and pick her up, and Bob checked and looked round, and said stolidly that he didn't rightly know what his father meant. Kit, however, gave Mrs. Holliday a wink, and pointed slyly to the empty seat; and he was sure he felt her weight when the trap moved on, though he was careful not to speak or look behind. . . .

He had so seldom ridden in a trap that had an empty seat that it made him ashamed to pass anybody in the road. He had never been proud about taking lifts himself, and nobody had been proud about taking them from him. He had been one of those folk who go packed like herring to market or fair, with somebody sitting on the nearside splashboard and the driver cosily wedged against the rail. Even if he started from home with only a passenger or two, he would be sure to collect others before he had gone far. Sometimes one of the squires had clambered into the trap and held the fiddle while Christopher held the reins. Somebody always held the fiddle when the squash was great, and the sensitive thing was happy in their hands, because, rough or smooth, they held it like fine glass. But the lasses held it like the lace of a bridal veil, because of the secret things it had danced into their hearts. Down

in the road again they would beckon Kit to stoop, and beg for a certain tune at a certain dance—"Dally an' dree," perhaps, come Saturday night, or "Ask and I'll tell you, my lad," at Huddleston clip. He always promised without a smile, and he never once forgot. Always he kept the tune for the lass, however he was begged, until the lad he was sure she wanted led her out.

Fiddles, he thought to himself, as he drove, had been more loved than anything else in the world. There were folks who loved precious stones and sold their souls for them and gave their lives, but surely that was a form of daftness and not love. And some loved books and held them gently in their hands—he had seen a parson or two do that and one of the squires. But most of the books died very soon, and if they lived they were like folks of a great age, telling you plainly to leave them alone with the past. Those that came again came always in a different dress, and even the words inside were not always the same. And some loved ships and horses and gave them their whole hearts, but neither a ship nor a horse lived for so very long. The ship went down in a storm, or grew rotten and gave at her seams, and no loved animal ever came to a man twice. But fiddles went on for ever and ever, and generally some-

body loved them all the time. It was the right sort of love, too, because nobody could love them in any other way—the sort that touches a loved thing lightly, and yet thrills to it all through. It was true that sometimes they got to the wrong homes, but you did not find them in terrible houses like Marget's, as a rule. And it was true that most folk didn't know how to use them, and that most folk didn't care, but it could only be just a few who wanted to do them harm. Marget's vehement hatred had had something abnormal at its back which had hurt him infinitely more than any insult to himself. He had never thought of the fiddle before except as an object of tenderness and pride; never once, in all his days, had he even seen it despised by a look. Why, the lasses had sometimes sent it a present for itself, and more than once he had found a flower thrust lightly under the strings. It was as much for the fiddle's sake as for his own that he was going home, because there it would be safe and could sing again on the marsh. He told everybody he met how glad the fiddle was to be going home, and they laughed and nodded and said they were delighted, too. Many a time, they told him, they had missed it when it was gone. Many a time, too, they had heard it down the wind.

He checked the trap so often that Bob protested at last, and said it was time they were getting to the farm, so after that he contented himself with a wave and a tremulous hail. He knew his friends by their walk long before they came up, and long before he overtook them by the look of their backs. Men of his particular class saw so many backs—at shows and sales, at market and at work on the land. It was always the backs which told anything at all; the faces were careful not to say too much. Very soon they took on that shut and silent look, as of men who had ceased to ask loud questions of life. It was their backs that betrayed them when they were getting done, or hinted subtly how their banking-accounts stood.

He always thought of backs when he thought of a crowd, and in thinking of people he generally thought of crowds. His life, like the lives of most on lonely farms, was divided between crowds and days spent more or less alone. The gossip that kept Marget so busy in the street did not belong to any method of living that he knew. The daily contact with the village and the village thoughts blurred his image of life and obsessed his mind. Here there was no sharp cleft between lonely and full hours, between spaces of silence and the bargaining of

the mart. Even collective work, such as harvest or hay, meant little more than just occasional speech. It was not association as Marget knew it, all garrulous mouths and empty, idle hands. And the crowds that he knew were real crowds, not two or three cronies hatless in the street. Many a time he had thought himself back in a crowd, sitting at Marget's in that upstairs room. Sometimes it was a wrestling-ring he saw, with Bob as conqueror in every round. There he saw again the swinging hype, the showy cross-buttock and the neat back-heel, and shouted with pride when Bob felled his man, and laughed aloud alone in his upstairs room. Marget had once burst in to ask him why he laughed, but he had only stared at her vacantly without reply. It was no use telling her that he was in a crowd, and that if the crowd saw fit to laugh he must laugh as well. . . . It was good to feel the press of the people all about, and the sun that was so pleasant on the green. The champion's belt that Bob always wore sent out a flash from each of its silver plates. . . .

Sometimes it was another ring that he saw in a green field, where red and white beasts went slowly droning round. The auctioneer's voice, with incredible speed, hammered and coaxed and demanded over his head. There was a ring of backs all around the rope, broad or

narrow, and straight or crippled and bent. There were rich and poor backs, feeble and strong, shy and aggressive and hopeful and depressed, and nearly all of them were somehow rather sad. There was every sort of jacket upon the backs, and every kind of collar about the necks. The gulf of the generations yawned between the wideawake and the Trilby hat; shades of degree were marked by the bowler and the cap. There were faces, of course, as well as backs, weather-beaten and shut, with unrevealing mouths. The voice swept over their still indifference like a storm of rain over empty sands. Only their eyes, weighing as they stared, followed the animals turning in the ring. . . . The voice beat at them and pressed and begged, calling a possible bidder by his name, and picking up bids without checking in its stride. By a chain of almost invisible signs the prices shaped themselves and mounted and grew. Even when competition was keenest, the faces rarely changed, and always after a spurt of laughter they set in the old lines. But all the time the backs were speaking aloud, the patient, pressing, fervently-interested backs. The hours passed, and clouds went over the sun, and the bored and scornful-eyed cattle turned and turned. . . .

Furniture sales, too, had always been one of

his old joys. There was something dramatic about household goods, torn from their setting into the uncovered day. Bow-fronted chests of drawers, and china and candlesticks, and old arm-chairs . . . there seemed to be folks still sitting in those chairs. At least, it was queer how chairs, like clothes and hats, kept the look of the people who had used them most. Perhaps it was never quite safe to sit in a chair that hadn't always been your own; he had often thought about that when the chairs went up at the sales. Sometimes, against the leather or the oak, he was certain he saw a shadowy old form, which even a burying of the highest class had not been able to carry quite away.

Once he had bought a chest of drawers with a still mahogany face and rounded knobs of glass. They looked like eight little pools in a shining wood, and he bought it because it made him think of that. The drawers pulled in and out on a grain of silk—his missis had tried them without looking at the knobs—and things that were put away in them came out again sweet and clean. It was a queer collection that found home in them at last, but he seemed to remember everything and its place. There were the clothes that the two of them had worn when they were wed . . . Grandfather's silk handkerchief and grandmother's silk shawl.

Funeral cards and a jubilee mug, and corals from over the sea. An old bow with a cracked back, and an umbrella that was a present from some squire. Rings of hair, still glossy and bright, too lovely in colour and texture to have come from any but a baby's head. Horn spectacles in a carved box, and old knitting-pins with carved hafts; and fiddle strings, coil upon coil, that he had never had the courage to burn. . . . There were things of his wife's, too, that he had put away when she was dead, though he had never succeeded in putting away the shoes. They gave the lie to her death merely by being about, and saying contentedly that she would be coming in. Old shoes, he thought to himself, like hats and chairs, had the secret of keeping what lovers seemed to lose.

He felt much the same about mirrors as he did about old chairs. Who knew how much they had kept of what they had seen, or how much of it they might suddenly reveal? Layer upon layer of pictures must be sunken in their depths, rosy and white faces, mad eyes and cloudy hair. The depth of a mirror was the height of the firmament itself; you had only to turn it up to the sky to notice that. There was room in it to make hiding-place for countless tragedies of lives. Each time a blind was drawn it took something from the day, and at night

who knew what it saw beyond the immediate circle of the lamp ? Nobody could look into it without adding something new. A figure, crossing the room, passed through its magic water and emerged, yet surely left a ghost of itself behind. Those that looked long enough saw strange old things, it was said, but who could tell that any saw the truth ? Minds and mirrors together could make magic enough to frighten half a world. And there were times when most folk, if it came to that, found even their own faces rather strange. Behind the presentment that they called themselves, eyes that were dead looked at them through their own, and smiles that belonged to others came to their lips.

There was a different set of backs at the furniture sales, less patient and more excitable, though not less keen. Mostly they wore bead mantles and cloth jackets and fur ruffs, and were topped by side-away bonnets and hats that wouldn't let you by. They twitched and argued a good deal, and let their faces say more than the faces of other crowds. But they were speaking backs, all the same, under mantle or jacket or plaid blouse. They, too, told the tale of youth or age, and the hope that hangs on gold in a stocking foot.

Then, at the dances, there had been other

backs again. The faces went by him under the lamps, but each was turned away from him towards another face. They swam in his gaze like faces drifting in a stream, and became one face of earnest, glowing youth. It was only the backs he remembered when all was done, the necks and the shining hair of the lasses, and the broad, strong shoulders of the lads.

Weddings and clippings, of course, meant crowds as well; hot-pot suppers and Primrose gatherings . . . whist-drives . . . annual fairs. Election crowds, when folk gathered in the streets, and broke one another's heads or other people's glass. Church, where folks knelt in long, straight shafts of sun, or looked through the cool windows and thought of the waiting hay. Then there were buryings, buryings without end, at which he had walked in crowds with uncovered head or lent a shoulder to the coffins of innumerable squires. Some day, sooner or later, everybody walked in that particular crowd. . . . And once he had even seen a London crowd, but that was very long ago. A lawsuit over some foreshore rights was making a stir, and Kit had been called as a witness in the case. The crowd up there was past all knowledge and sense, and nobody knew each other or jerked a head. A policeman found him at a pavement edge, waiting, he said, for people to "get by."

The last crowd of all had been Marget's cottage crowd, where there had been no room for him and little breath, but now he was coming back from it as he had come from all the rest, from press and clamour and hurry into unpeopled peace. He had escaped on to the edge of the sand, where always the hunted stag turns to safety and the sea. Now he could look along the flat which rested the eye, and breathe the far-travelled air which only the west wind had breathed before. There were evening and sun and shadows, and fields, and deep-rooted mountains, and slow beasts. There was a breeze stirring the shore-grasses that in all their lives never know what it is to be really still, and on the top of the bank others quivered and bent, and straightened and bent and quivered again. Bending, they looked like delicate strokes of a slanting pen, slashed on the golden page of the open west. The railway arches over the sand looked like great black doors shut between him and the coloured park that lay behind. Only the one through which they had come stood open wide, showing the ribbon of road laid flatly through. Beyond, where it fled away from the open marsh, it coiled into shadow by wall and stooping tree. When night came, that door, too, would close, so that Marget, however she tried, could never pass. He would

remember that when he went upstairs to bed, and sleep steadily unafraid in the house at the sand's edge. If the moon chose to look in, he would not care for the moon. It would have none of the terror of Marget's peering eye, that had sometimes awakened him as he lay and dreamed.

Yes, he was coming back as he had come before, and not even in dreams would he come like this again. Into this last, long, beautiful journey he had gathered his life, and men—old men—were not allowed to do that twice. Now in the house on the edge of the sands he would stay quietly until he died. Thomas and Agnes would want to take him out—to market and church and Milthrop Cattle Fair, but however they urged he did not mean to go. He had the fairs and the rest of them in his mind, and did not need to go looking for them afield. Besides, if he went, he would only find them strange, a confusion of strange faces and still stranger backs. Thomas and Agnes would fret and think he was getting moped, but after a bit they would let him have his way. He would watch them trundle away and wave his stick, and they would stop and call to know if he had changed his mind. But he would never change his mind or leave his recovered inheritance for an hour. Somewhere there was a point where

the mind never changed again, but stayed as still as the earth in a new-dropped wind. And the point where he would stay in that poised stillness would surely be the home of all his dreams.

They would go, and he would see to the house, and when there were barns to see to, he would see to the barns as well. He had always been a rare hand at keeping them happy and good, and if he had failed with Marget's brood, that had been only an accident by the way. Marget's children, after the first, had seldom been children to his mind. They had been enemies, torturers, mockers, and trained spies. Only once, in the Little Game, had they ever been part of the company he loved, and very soon afterwards he had cast them out. But no child born on the marsh would ever be such as they ; the house would prevent it—the peaceful, noble house. They would be friends all right, he and those real children bred to the sound of the sea. Thomas and Agnes could trust them to him all right. All day he and the fiddle would hear their feet, pattering after them on the garden path, and climbing laboriously up the uncarpeted stair. All day the little shrill voices would follow the curlews out to sea, and at night the house would be filled with the hush of a house where children sleep. And on that last

early morning, when he came to die, he would hear a little child waking close at hand. . . .

No, he would never be lonely again in all his life, or dull and moped because he was left behind. There were so many things waiting for him to find them again that he would need another life to seek them all. Every inch of the land and stone of the house would have something to say to him when he got back. How many places he had loved would pull at his heart until he had looked on them with his bodily eyes? There were hedges, twists of the road, lights over hill and bay—things that in all his life had not failed in enchantment yet. No other magic ever held but that; no other spell grew stronger with the years. Nature kept hold of her worshippers until they died. With a branch of cherry or a robin's song, the smell of hay or the fall of June shadows pretending to be night, she could bring them back their youth to the very last. This, out of all the treasures in the world, was the only one that was golden to the end.

Perhaps he would never do half of what he wished, in the little breath of time that he had left. Perhaps he would find his legs too weak to carry him very far. They had grown cramped and shaky in Marget's prison-house. Perhaps his eyes, when wanted, would drop their lids

and sleep. They had slept so little at Marget's that they were tired.

Yet somehow he must gather his treasure again, if only between the limits of a year. He must wait for the hoar-frost over the fields and the yellow of winter sun through a black-limbed beech. There were growing things, too, that he must see again—daffodils, foals, and the plums on the south wall. The purple of Michaelmas daisies in a mist, light on a yacht's sails and the mysterious glimmer of hard ice. Sea-mist that was the ghost of the sea, with the blue-topped mountains rocks in a snowy surf; primrose evening over the sands and the islands of desire. The smell of things, too—warm hay, wet earth, and salt, lilac, syringa, the chill smell of coming snow. The feel of things—turf and sand . . . and, rough to the elbows, the stone of the garden wall. The sound of things—bees in the wallflower; plover and gull; the lone owl wheeling round the barn; the roar of the river in flood and the swish of a little tide; the trains in the night where they hung above the sea. And always there were the sounds about the house—the separate voices of door and window and stair, of furniture that never speaks until it is night, of winds in the house that go not in or out, but sleep in dark corners until they stir again. . . .

Perhaps the losing of well-known sounds was the loneliest loss of all, and none so lonely and blank as the loss of a well-known step. Then there were other sounds, as familiar as a voice, that yet in years and years were never traced. . . .

There were doors he wanted to open again, suddenly and alone, and, standing on the threshold, feel all that the empty room contained. That sudden opening of a door was one of the beautiful happenings of life. Even outside you heard the memories speak, creeping through chinks and slipping along the floor. Outside, they seemed to catch you by the throat; but, once the knob was turned, they kissed your cheek. Folks such as he could go blindfold to their homes, and know where they were as soon as they stepped inside. They knew by the feel and smell and sound of things, and by a warm, familiar presence in the air. That was really why he was going home—to open the doors again, and stand, and feel. Afterwards he would go round and handle things . . . absorbing them tranquilly, drawing the place in. Satisfied—that was the word he wanted for it all; satisfied, fulfilled . . . at rest . . . *come back*. . . .

It was surely this great content that helped men to die when it came to the last. After all, it only meant going a little closer to one's earth.

No one need mind if he wasn't carried away and laid in some foreign spot he had never seen. It wouldn't seem right to see strange names round you when you awoke, and strange folk rising up at the sound of the Trump. Why, there were some he knew who would be so put about, they would likely never stir their coffin-lids ! They'd stick in their graves and say they hadn't heard, before they'd go cheek-by-jowl with off-comers to the Throne.

Would there be folk in Heaven as set on a spot as so many of them were on earth ? There were plenty who wouldn't know how to put on time without their own little village and its feuds. As for those who had really loved a place, they couldn't do anything but break their hearts. There were folks you could never mix—not even in Heaven ; folks from places that fought like biting steggs. You couldn't just set them alongside in their crowns, and take it for granted things would come out right. . . .

They wouldn't get far with their singing, anyhow, he thought, because you couldn't make real music with people who didn't suit. He had joined a choral society when he was young, but left it because he could only sing with those he liked. If somebody sat beside him who wasn't a friend, he hated to hear their voices mingle and touch. The other man's voice was an

enemy slaying his own, and instead of song there was murder in his heart. Song was a personal revelation that only a friend should hear, and if you sang with an enemy you gave yourself away. He had had the same trouble at the dances, too, with a concertina played by Darby Gill. The concertina itself was a real joy, because of its big chords and its depth and swing. It gave an actual physical push to the crowd, so that you could see the couples swaying as it swayed, but he never played his best when it was there, because he and the fiddle hated Darby Gill. He hoped he wouldn't have Darby next to him in Heaven. Anyhow, if he had, he would never touch a string. . . .

"Tide'll be turning soon," Bob said, and though Kit had forgotten him long since, he did not start, because the sea is always at the back of the marsh-dweller's mind. Even the village-folk had known the tides by wind and sky, though some of them never went down to the bay in years. Kit and his son, of course, knew them as they knew their meals. They could have told you, every day, what time the returning water drew itself from the deep. . . .

It came to him suddenly that for two years he had never seen the sea, not even heard it except through the sound-carriers of the wind. The thought of it set his heart leaping, and to

his shame and astonishment he found that he was afraid. He seemed to himself to be quite defenceless on the open road, with only the bank to stop what was coming out of the west. His terror degraded him in his own eyes, and he was as afraid of the fear as of the object of the fear. Perhaps it was because he was old that he was afraid, or because he had missed the daily miracle for so long. At all events, he trembled and gazed, and felt his hands turn cold, and longed to be at the farm. It was amazing that folk who knew what the sea could do should drive so slowly in the line of the dormant tide. If there had been any sign of the tide he would have clutched at the reins, and frightened Bob to death by shouting at the horse. He looked at the land and wondered why panic wasn't abroad, and why the stock, with its sure sense of coming ill, didn't stare and cower. Once that far, smooth water had lifted and turned, there seemed no reason why it should ever stop. He knew only too well, of course, that it did not always stop. He himself had seen it under an angry moon, lift and lift into a huge and white-topped wall, and sweep the marsh into a tumbling sea. . . .

"We'd best be getting on," he said in a sharp tone, and Bob heard the fear in his voice, and glanced at him in surprise. The old man must

be getting tired, he thought; he had seemed so quiet and contented at the start. He did his best to encourage the slow horse, but they only jolted a little more, and seemed no nearer to the farm. Presently he spoke again, as if he had come to some slow conclusion of his own. "Tide's low, just now," he said, as if to himself, and at once felt his father relax and settle back. "You'll hear next to nowt on it to-night. I reckon it'll gang nigh as soon as it comes. . . ."

The old man gave him no answer to his careful speech; only he sighed suddenly and then sat still. He told himself that he might have known as well as Bob, if he hadn't frightened himself out of his daft wits. He looked at the west and knew that no tide could come out of it to his hurt—out of that fragrant stillness and that golden air. And yet, in spite of his fear, he wanted to see a tide before he died—one of those splendid surges rollicking up the bay. Each roller seemed to travel faster than the one in front, and over-rode it in a shower of spray. The salt in the air was so sharp that it stung the eyes, and the life in it blew the spirit out of its shell; but he wasn't strong enough to face that yet. There was a summer tide that he wanted to see, too, a full, blue tide with a ripple all over its face, breaking in long, crisp waves along the sand. This tide was the most human tide

of all, a live, beautiful thing that you could almost clasp. . . . The waves, where they broke on the sand, were like slender bars of amethyst crested with snow. . . . But the tide that was coming out of that quiet west would never break ; it would barely even lip at sand or wall. Hardly the wisest would know the moment when the deep sea sent it out. There would be no bull-roar to herald its approach, topped by the vicious hissing-note of surf. It would not even whisper when it rounded the point, and scarcely a line would come on the sand to show that it was there. A sleeping water, shallow and very smooth, it would steal and spread like the shadow of a cloud. Without fear and without hurry it would come, like the light that spreads before the sun has topped the hill. If the moon came up, there would be a golden glass where there had just been sand ; but if there was no moon, only the river would know about the tide.

" Tide's low," Bob said, and the peace of the evening came back.

But, beautiful as the journey had been, he was beginning to wish that it would come to an end. That sudden shock seemed to have drained his strength and left him afraid of the fear within a fear. He would have nothing to say to the house if he was tired, and no number of

perfect after-days could make up for the wonder of that first glad hour. He might even miss the first sight of it, perhaps, if his eyes should remember that they were really old. His brain might be numb or vacant at the first crossing of the door. It might be only a tired old man that would stagger in, thinking of nothing but supper and then bed. . . .

He tried to rest his eyes by shutting them for a while, but found that he suffered more from the jolting of the trap. Every jerk of the horse seemed to startle his heart and hurt his bones, as well as stirring again the thought of that sleeping fear. And yet, as soon as he opened his eyes, his mind was off once more. Even the grass could not grow, nor the road wind, without setting his memories running out of the past.

It was strange that he should have the fear of the sea so strong on him to-night, when all around him was calm and evening gold. He had never been afraid of the sea when he had it under his feet. Once he had gone to play at a dance across the sands, and had sailed home again at break of day. He had come away from the hot room with the dancing still in his brain, and gone down to the forsaken, dream-like shore. It was black under the chestnuts roofing the narrow path, but a grey light stood over the tide that seemed to grow upward from

the sea. The water broke crisply and coolly at his feet as he stumbled over the beach and came to the sand. Near to him, like a figure flung on a cloud, a man was holding a vague and ghostly boat, and out on the dim tide where it merged into the air, a shadowy ship pulled at a shadowy rope. She, too, was the merest phantasm of herself, with her spidery cords and nebulous mast and spars. It was impossible to believe that she could support the pressure of a foot, so that the life and lift in her as he scrambled aboard came with a shock of exquisite surprise. His body and brain felt heavy as lead against the lightness of her build, and yet the effect of his weight was merely an increased impression of her buoyant strength. His mind, that was still full of whirling sounds, swayed to the water-floor on which she rode. From the elastic spring of her under his feet, it seemed as if she must leap into the air as soon as she was released. Turned as she was on her anchor to meet the tide, she swung on her heel the moment she felt the sail, and was off like a racer before the flag is down. The boat dropped from them and became a blur, and the line of shore was blurred, and the climbing town. The few dim lights that burned were still to be seen after the shapes of the houses had been painted out, showing mistily yellow above the sea, like

lamps in the long slits of a castle wall. Then they, too, went as if suddenly blown out, and only the cap of pine that crowned the hill spoke to the presence of earth against the sky. Kit was a crouched shadow in the boat, staring ahead of him for a sight of the marsh, but the great, grey wing of the sail seemed spread across the world. The wind was behind them and they fled hushed, as shadows of clouds move silently on the sea. The motion was easing as sleep, and healing as still prayer. He thought of the dancing figures in the town which had seemed so beautiful to him while he watched, yet were earthy and clumsy and slow compared with this. Even the music—even the fiddle itself—seemed noisy beside that delicate wash at the keel. This was the peace of the sea of which men spoke, this great and painless detachment from things of the earth. In the wide spaces how easily God was found! On the water, as in the mountains and on the Hill of Light, it was good for men to be there. Sometimes he slept for a few moments, and awakened again and slept, but the man at the tiller neither moved nor slept. He was like a statue set in the low stern, with the straight shadow of the helm stretching between them like a bar. His eyes were lifted a little towards the sail, and the slack of the sheet lay in his quiet hand. Each

time that Kit awoke the grey had changed, because of the light over the hills that as yet he could not see. The light came into it as out of an emptied cup, like a white wine teemed in a sombre, misted pool. Slowly, as the land came back to the sea, he could see the lake mountains piled into the sky, all turned to wait for the coming light from the east, but even before he could trace them he was sure they turned. It was strange to look into the blackness where he knew them to be, and think of the dark shapes waiting in a crowd. So huge they were, and solid and old, homes alike for the short-living and the long dead. Perhaps they saw, whom others, through the mist of morning, could not see. It was like being watched by giants with many eyes.

But he was altogether alone when he forgot the hills, because the steersman was only a part of the boat. Even the wind had nothing to say in this silent world, and the water was like a monster moving floor, rushing them poised on its expanse. So light they felt, he and the boat, and yet through every plank he could feel the passionate quiver of taut strength. The sail whitened as the light whitened, and the mast grew yellow instead of grey. Then a level line cut across the threads of rope, and behind it arose the misty country of the marsh.

The sun came, bringing the clean first colour of all, that for its purity alone is sufficient miracle and joy. Slowly at first, and then faster and faster all the time it lifted the earth out of the many-shaded grey. Here and there and then there the land showed itself awake, glowing in great breadths in this place and then in that. Not all at once was the colour painted in, but gradually, as if waiting for the eye to catch the effect of green stretches and white walls, and the sudden blue-grey of jutting rock. The mountains weighed heavier and heavier upon the earth, showing their great bones and russet bracken slopes.

The kiss of the sun on the sail seemed to waken the statue into life, showing him wiry and lithe, with the blue of a warmer water in his eyes. After the marsh stood up he came about, and at once the world was all struggle and noise, straining and drumming canvas overhead, and hissing and bubbling water under the bow. The boat felt stiff from stem to stern, a passionate live thing set against control. She leaned over, as if bent on ridding herself of her human freight, and let the water line up and slap itself over their feet. The sail was gleaming now, and the bay deepening into blue, and suddenly Kit saw the dazzling front of his home, with the yew sharp-cut and black against its side. It had the

rippling tide before it and the shining river behind, and where there was neither river nor tide there were green fields and thick hedges and white roads. . . . Faint at the upstairs window, he thought he saw a face. . . .

Now they had found the channel and were coming at the house, rushing and winged as they had been before, such a flying thing of the deep as Agnes had once seen. It seemed to Kit, as it had seemed to her, that they would ride on that moving water straight into the house itself. The boat raced towards it as a horse towards a fence, only smoother and swifter and keener than any horse. He clambered out to the bow and knelt on the seat, and felt the ride and lift of her over the carrying sea. Kneeling, he thought of ancient figureheads, and knew what they had felt and why they stood for the whole exultation of the world. . . . It was plain to him what he should do when they rose at the house. The flung-back casement upstairs was like a sign, and behind it the face still glimmered and watched and leaned. Straight out of the boat, as she lifted under his feet, he would step unhurriedly into the room. . . .

He rose from his knees and stood erect, supremely prepared, and fell in a clutching heap as they came about. For a moment he sat still,

grasping at his wits, confounded by violent defraudation and shock. Now they were hove to under the farmyard wall, but it did not seem to him that they had really arrived. The boat seemed limp and broken, injured though not dead, a flapping, fretting thing checked in its flight before the goal was reached. He felt a blinding spasm of rage as if he had been robbed, and even when he stood on the shore and watched the boat beat back, he was still cheated and angry in his heart. Now he was conscious that he was very tired, just a weary player coming home in the dawn. He turned at last and walked slowly to the house, and was glad of the open doorway in his path. As he walked he looked at the window upstairs, but without either exaltation or desire. He had been so near perfection, as it seemed, and at the impossible moment it had escaped. The room was still there, but his passionate impulse towards it had died down. In youth one seeks one's sacred place on wings; it is only in later life that it is sweet to climb to it by a homely stair.

Bob had stopped the horse and scrambled down, and was busy with the latch of a gate. Kit brought himself back to the present with a jerk, though the floor of the trap was still the light, curving timbers of the yacht. In front of

him was a long, green road, a wide alley hedged on either side, with the dykes beside the hedges so full of growth that they looked almost level with the level road. The hedges themselves, as far as he could see, were pink with little rose-faces and purple with vetch. Now they were nearly home; the green road always meant that they were nearly home. Bob took the horse by the head and called to his father to take the reins, and he gathered them up shakingly, glad, after so long, to feel the touch of the rough leather against his hands. But all the time he was troubled by a sense of something amiss, in spite of the green road that meant the journey's end. He wondered why he had lived again that vivid experience on the boat. The shadow of that disillusionment long ago seemed stretching also across this perfect hour.

And then gradually his mind cleared again, and set the warning and creeping trouble aside. There came back to him like a repeated song the sweetness of this tranquil evening return. The grass crushed softly underneath the wheels, and on the quiet road there was peace for the creaking bones of the ancient trap. He felt warm in the sun and soothed and freshened by the tender air. The light was gold on the dark coat of the horse, and on Bob's stooping shoulders

and bent head. Yet behind all the comfort of renewed content he felt continually that he was very tired. The journey had been a long one—longer than he had thought; perhaps he would never have come if he had known how long. Those mind-travels of his had been easier by far, when his body was left behind and nothing jolted or jarred. He was perfectly certain that he could never face it again, but then he was done with all his journeying now. He was at home; he had escaped Marget; he was at home. It did not matter how tired you were when once you had reached home.

The green road ran out from between its hedges close in front, and seemed to be lost in a stretch of open field. It looked, like the rest of the old man's span of life, as if it ran smoothly to the end, yet all the while the river lay between field and road. Often enough, folks coming home in the dark had gone over the sheer drop into its hidden bed. Kit tightened the reins nervously when he came to the bank, and Bob felt the tug on the bit and glanced behind. The old man was out of himself tonight, he thought, and as full of the shakes as a piece of doddering grass. First of all, he had boggled at the sea, and here he was taking steck at the river, too! He turned the horse

to the left, and stopped again, at a meadow gate. Thomas was waiting at the meadow gate.

He was up at the trap side before it came to rest, and as his eyes fell upon him Kit felt suddenly very old. This son of his was so lithe and strong, so full of life at its height, so healthy and fine-coloured and clean-drawn. There was nothing about him that was betrayed or made ashamed by the pure tones and line of marsh and sky. By comparison Kit felt himself and Bob to be broken and fusty like the trap, unbeautifully finished things blurring the exquisitely ending day. Not all the clean air and space could give them back that look, which belongs only to Nature and the young. They were blots on the landscape, he felt, an offence to the eye . . . like an old boot flung away in a flowering hedge . . . old bottles cast on the emptiness of the sands. . . .

Thomas, however, was reaching up a hand, and there was nothing but hearty greeting in his face. He kept saying, "You've landed, dad—you've landed at last!" as if it was something brought about by a charm. He managed to spare Bob a jerk of the head, and then instantly turned to the older man again. Bob looked at them both with a somewhat curious stare—the brother that seemed so hearty

and so glad, and the father that was out of himself to-night.

Kit said, " Ay, ay," in a voice that was rather vague and tired, because now he was looking past Thomas at the gate. He had not noticed the gate when they first stopped, because of that withering picture of Thomas in his strength, but now he saw that it was not the gate he knew. It was either a new gate straight from the Hall works, or else it was the old one mended and put to rights. It was painted, too, which in any case would have made it strange, because it was many a long year since Kit had painted his gates. Perhaps he should have welcomed this first symbol of advance, but instead he felt coldly angry with the four-ruled thing, swinging so neatly on its stoup. He was accustomed to broken and jagged and hanging bars, made lovely in velvet greens by the brushes of wind and rain. Always, on coming home, he had seen the house through the bars, the painted colours of home through the ancient, mellow frame. Sunset he had seen through the old bars—long lines of yellow in a frosty sky, and the red ball of the sun dropping fierily over snow. He had seen pure morning and sepia afternoon, and the wild smokes of stormy dusks in spring, and the old gate had vignetted them softly, as the soft lines of the hedges framed the fields. But it

was not possible to look at the house through this soulless square, cutting the scene like a knife with its hard blue lines. Now there came to him, as on the yacht, the sense of violent robbery at a journey's end. Just here he had meant to stand and stare, to yield to the first ecstasy of sight, and this parvenu gate had come brutally between. He glared at it so fiercely that Thomas asked what was wrong, but Kit only said, "Nowt, nowt," and allowed him to help him down. Bob looked at him from beside the horse's head, watching with curious, half-shut eyes.

Thomas did not appear to notice that the other two scarcely spoke. He was so busy with his welcome, so full of a rather nervous pleasure and intense relief. He talked all the time he was helping the old man down, and after he had him safely on the ground. "You'll be a bit stiff, likely, but you're rarely lish. . . . Watch out for yon step, now—ay, yon's it! You've brought fiddle along wi' you?—ay, there it be. Catch hold of my arm, and we'll get along to t'house."

Agnes had been right in supposing that Bob would not come in. Thomas pressed him a little, but he shook his head, and turned the horse and climbed back into the trap. Once there, however, he did not drive away, but sat watch-

ing his father with that new knowledge in his face. Thomas thought he was hesitating, after all, and went back to him when he had led the old man through the gate, but Bob only bent a little over the wheel, and told him something in a lowered tone. Both remembered, as they looked at each other, another evening on the marsh. . . .

Kit stayed where Thomas had planted him in the track, looking in front of him towards the mountains and the sea. Now he could look at the house without anything in between, and forget the shock of the gate that swung behind. The house, at least, seemed just as it had been, true to his trust and faithful to his dream. Just so it had looked a thousand days before, with the yew's tall finger pointing to the sky. Even in his most absent moods he had never neglected the yew, but had managed to keep it smooth as a quill pen. He had liked to see its shadow fall clean against the house, the one thing black and sharp in his coloured, shifting life. Windows and roofs he saw, orchard and yard; garden and hedge and the white penthouse of the porch. The light lay over it all like the blessing of a hand, and when he came to it, it would bless him, too. Just for a moment, however, he watched it from afar, comparing it, inch by inch, with the picture in his heart.

No, it had not failed him, in spite of his fear, and he was safe. The substance had not broken in his fingers and crushed the dream. A passion of thankfulness swept over him as he stood, and then, turning to look for Thomas, he saw the gate.

IV

THEY went arm-in-arm along the meadow path, the young and the old masters of Beautiful End. Thomas had always been a silent soul, but now he talked as if he would never stop. Every now and then he laughed as well, a satisfied, happy chuckle in his throat. Also he acted showman, which was hard to bear, and Kit said "Ay" and "Nay," and looked the other way. He wished with all his heart that Thomas would stop pointing and hold his tongue. He did not want to be shown things; most passionately he did *not*. He could find what he wanted for himself, and see it as Thomas could never see it, if he tried for the rest of his life. There was no use in showing things at any time, if it came to that, because no two persons saw them just the same. Thomas was equally busy pointing out what was new, and introducing old friends, as it were, by the scruff of the neck. Thomas had been off at service from a lad, yet here he was teaching his father about the farm, although Kit had never ceased seeing it since he went away. Did

he remember the three old trees in a clump, and how deep the river ran below the house? Glimpses of bay and moss . . . his own fields . . . things that were closer than breathing and nearer than hands and feet! He was ashamed of himself for being irritated and vexed, because, of course, Thomas was only meaning to be kind. It wasn't every son who would do so much for a thriftless dad, and he didn't know he was spoiling things at the start. He must just be allowed to talk himself to a stop, and then perhaps they would have a little peace. He would surely get tired of pointing, after a bit. There was nothing to do but say "Ay" and look away.

The meadow was altered, somehow, he said to himself, though just for the moment he was puzzled to say why. It had a smoother and greener look than he remembered it to have worn, though at the same time it seemed somehow rather bare. "There's a deal less thistles than there used," he said, when he understood, and Thomas laughed and nodded his head with pride.

"Ay, and there'll be fewer still afore I'm through." His eyes went keenly across the meadow and over the land, seeing things as his father would never see them, if he tried for the rest of his life. "I've not made a job of it

yet, not by a deal, but there's over much to take in hand right off. I just went for t'things as was worst, and t'others mun just make shift and bide their time. I'd ha' liked to have had the whole place sided afore you come, but yon was a bigger bite than I could chew. . . ."

There was a warm satisfaction in his voice in spite of his words, for he had done wonders already, as, of course, he knew. Already the farm had a look of care such as it had not worn for many a long year. He could not help feeling proud that it had changed its face even in so short a time, and was perfectly sure that his father would be proud as well. Kit, however, seemed scarcely to notice what he said, but was busy staring at the cattle under the hedge.

"What's come to old Bonny?" he demanded, suddenly stopping short in the rough track. "You've never gone and parted with her, surely—a rare good cow like yon?"

"I never had her to part with," Thomas said, with a look of surprise. "Bonny's been dead a while back, father, if you come to think on. Even the best can't last for ever, and Bonny had her spell."

"It's the first I've heard on it," Kit replied in a vexed tone. He stared aggrievedly at the new stock, as if the blame of his disappointment

was somehow theirs. "What d'ye think it was as took her off at the last?"

"Nobbut old age, I reckon!" Thomas said, with a laugh. "What, it was not so long afore you give up the farm! You've never gone and forgotten yon, I'm sure!"

"Ay, I reckon I have," Kit said in a voice like a full stop, and stared for a while longer at the drowsy group, before he turned away and left them in the sun. He remembered now, of course, that Bonny was dead, and was deeply ashamed of his lapse and his daft talk. It was just that he had forgotten that things change, because in his dream of home there was never any change. Everything in it had been as stable as the stars, even such creatures of time as thistles and cows. But he couldn't let Thomas think he was fretting after the past, so presently he made an effort to speak again. "Seemingly you've a decent bit o' stock," he said. "I reckon you've got an eye for the right stuff."

Thomas had been conscious of a sudden chill, but this remark brightened him at once. "Happen I've not done that badly," he answered as modestly as he could, longing to stop again for another stare. He wanted to drag his father across the field, and tell him the history of each separate beast, and how they had all been bargains beyond belief. But there was plenty of

time for that, and the old man must be tired; besides, Agnes was waiting for them at the house. "I've always meant to go in for right good stuff," he said. "I always knew I'd be stock-proud if I got the chance. Farming's like owt else—there's nowt beats the best. A good roan's my choice—you can't do better than yon. Your old Bonny was a rare good cow, if nobbut she hadn't been white."

"She suited me well enough," Kit said, in the tone that meant the subject was now closed, and Thomas remembered himself and hedged with shame. Agnes would have plenty to say, he felt sure of that, if he put the old man about before ever he reached the house! "There's always changes," he murmured, after a while, not knowing that he was echoing Marget and Bob. "Farm's in the same spot, anyway, and the yew. Grass grows much the same colour, I'll be bound; and there's always the sea, as doesn't change at all. . . ."

Kit remembered Bob when they were halfway to the house, and turned to look for him, thinking him at their heels. But the track behind them was empty and the gate shut, and there was no more sign of Bob and his trap than if they had never been. The old man wanted to know why he had gone away, and Thomas looked shy at the question, and seemed vexed.

"Nay, I doubt he's a bit put out about summat, is Bob. Happen he's not best suited at you coming to us. . . . Any road, he wasn't for coming up to the house, whatever I said. He said he'd be stopping a while at Low Moss End, and likely getting his tea along wi' 'em an' all. . . ."

Kit remained standing still in the middle of the field, looking rather forlornly down the track. "Happen he'd a message or summat for 'em," he observed. "They're cousins o' Marget's, now I come to think on." There was a lost sound in his voice, as if he had somehow been betrayed. "I never thought as he wouldn't be coming up."

Thomas had come to a stand, too, looking crestfallen and cast down. He had never imagined for a moment that his father would want Bob. One would have thought he had had enough of that family and to spare! "Is there owt you wanted to tell him?" he ventured at last. "I could happen slip down and fetch him as soon as I've had my tea."

But before he had stopped speaking Kit had swung round, shaking his head and making for the house. Now he seemed to be running away from Bob, thrusting him into the distance that lay behind. He wondered why he had asked for his elder son, and why he had felt

deserted when he saw the empty field. Bob was the last connecting link with what he had left, and he couldn't be really free until Bob had gone. He ought to have felt exultant instead of afraid, but there was no trusting his wretched nerves to-night. He felt ashamed of himself again . . . he was always feeling ashamed. He was the sort that would try to escape on the threshold of Paradise itself. . . .

He breathed more easily when they reached the garden gate, because it did not seem possible that he could turn back now, and he saw with relief that the gate was still the same. It was painted, indeed, in the new shade of blue, but that did not prevent it from being the same gate underneath. He knew it to be the same by the missing spoke, which must have been missing for over twenty years. Thomas apologised for the spoke, but he paid no heed; he was so busy gloating over the fact that it wasn't there.

He hurried between the box borders along the path, and all the sweet scents of the garden came to him, and the homely, well-known odours of the farm. There was lavender somewhere, wallflower, mignonette; sweet briar, faint salt from the far sea, and the scent of the ready grass asking for the scythe. Now he was close to the whitewashed porch, with its stone seats

and its arch of rose, and the little beds at its feet that were full of snowdrops in the spring. Then he was inside the porch, in the stream of gold that went swimming through the door, and felt himself shabby and poor in the purity of the light. He was like a threadbare tramp, he thought to himself, being carried up to Heaven in a chariot of fire. . . . The kitchen seemed dim and narrow to him after the open marsh, or else his eyes were weakened by weariness and sun. Nothing came out or spoke to him as he stood, waiting for the first tremendous swelling of joy. In the old days the peace of the house had been so free that it had never hidden itself until he was inside. It had come out to meet him before he reached the porch, like a child that runs to a father coming home. To-night the kitchen was empty and very quiet, but it was an aloof stillness, self-absorbed . . . detached. The voice of the grandfather's clock in the silence spoke as if speaking only to itself. He, too, now that he was under the roof, felt curiously detached. Only half of him, he felt, was in the house; the other—the dreaming half—was left outside. But still he hoped and stood, waiting for the uprising of his heart, and Thomas, respectfully sympathetic, waited too. Perhaps it was because of Thomas that the magic would not work. Suddenly he began to

feel self-conscious under his son's eyes, and the fear that was fear of a fear came drifting back. Shrinking, he took a hasty plunge through the kitchen door, and caught his foot on a flag as he went in.

Thomas, following, found him just inside, puzzling and staring worriedly at the floor. "Summat catched my foot," he was saying repeatedly with a pained surprise. He bent down to the flag as if wishing to test it with his hand as well as his feet. "I never mind catching my foot afore," he said. It was just as if he couldn't believe he had done the thing, as if his boots had been bound to know the flag—the same old boots—all patched—that he had been wearing when he left. But he and the boots had forgotten because they were old, and the flag had forgotten the memory of his tread. It did not do to fret about these things, because perhaps they always happened to folks who went away. Marget, at least, would have told him so, he knew. Nevertheless, the trivial little misehance weighed upon his mind. It was like some base betrayal on the part of ancient friends.

"You're a bit shaky, likely," Thomas said, dumping the bundle on the nearest chair. He blinked his eyes a moment because of the sun, and then he began to look about for his wife.

He couldn't persuade himself at first that she wasn't there, because this was the great moment of which she had talked. He had almost expected to meet her in the field, or at least to discover her waving from the porch. Failing that, they would find her when they got inside, ready with welcome for a tired old man. Here they were, however, at the journey's end, only to find her vanished off the earth. Not only was she not in the kitchen as he had thought, but he had a terrible feeling that she wasn't even in the house. There was no stir in the air of the kitchen as though somebody had just run out. The silence of it was settled and whole, and seemed to flow away into unstirred deeps beyond. Just for a moment he felt his old loneliness crush back, thinking her shut away from him where he could not go. Then he roused himself and went to the stair and called, and Kit stopped staring at the flag and shuffled into the room. There he stood and waited, as he had learned to wait, with his careless-careful fingers clasping fiddle and bow. The kitchen still seemed dim and rather strange, and nothing spoke to him out of it that he knew. The sun sent pointers of light across the room, picking out tables and chairs he had never seen.

Thomas shouted and said she wouldn't be far; and shouted again and said she wouldn't

be long. This sudden check at the very start seemed to have thrown all their pleasant planning out of gear. The great occasion couldn't begin until Agnes was in place, and as far as he could discover she was gone for good. He thought, as he waited and fretted, that things were going amiss . . . right from the earliest moment they were going amiss. . . .

He said over and over again that she wouldn't be far, just as Kit had repeated his speech about the flag. They were like helpless, stranded actors dropping cues that there was nobody left in the theatre to pick up. Then Thomas bellowed again in the midst of a last excuse, and they heard a door fling open above them and afterwards slam. There was a running and flutter and clatter on the stair, and Agnes came flying past him into the room.

She went straight across to the guest and took his hand, her face warm with welcoming smiles, and her voice full of self-reproach. " Eh, now, to think I missed you after all ! " she said ; " an' me that set on being on the spot ! I never thought you'd catch me unbeknownst. I was nobbut giving a look to things upstairs. . . . Ay, well, you're welcome, I'm sure . . . you are that. We're right glad, Thomas and me, to have you come. . . ."

She still had hold of the hand which he left

limply in her clasp, and he looked at her smiling face and said "Thank you," and smiled too. The kindliness of her welcome warmed his heart, though it was not the welcome he wanted from the house. It was like the welcome from the cottages in the row, which was pleasant and comforting but had nothing to do with home. Agnes was mistress of the place, but she was a stranger, too, and no stranger could give you the real feeling of home. She had never been in the house when he went in his dream, and now that she spoke in the dream it was bound to seem strange. But she was pleasant to look at, and homely, and very kind, and she would grow to be part of the real things after a while. So when she continued to smile he smiled again, and Thomas smiled joyfully over by the stair. Perhaps there was just a touch of self-satisfaction in the smile, because he was thinking of Marget's welcome home. Anyhow, they had done the old man better than that, even if Agnes *had* been off the spot! He forgot, as he watched, that he had been afraid, that things had seemed to be going utterly wrong. He only remembered that they were perfect now—the house, the weather, and the kindly wife. Certainly, it would be queer if his father wasn't content . . . but then he was positive he would be content. . . .

Agnes was sure of it, at least, sure as trium-

phant angels gathering tired souls into heaven. Now she was laughing and repeating her first speech—it was curious how they repeated themselves to-night. Then she flew to the hearth and set the kettle back to boil, afterwards swinging round to put the visitor into his chair.

"Set you down, Father, and I'll make the tea. You'll be wanting your tea, I reekon, after yon drive. Now, then, Thomas, shove it nearer the fire, and don't stand poping like a pig at a punch! There you be, Father . . . champion . . . now you'll do. Shall I put fiddle down for you, by the way?"

He looked at her as she stood in front of him, holding out her hand, and a look of anxious terror crossed his face. It was true that she looked like the lasses who had loved the fiddle in the past, but that was before he had learned to be afraid. Still, this was home, and to refuse was to be false to the dream from the very first, because home was a place where every man's foolishness was safe. "You'll mind what you're at?" he pleaded, searching her with his eyes, and she nodded her head wisely, and for the first time did not smile. Taking it gently, she set it on a table near, and there was no tremor of nervousness from the strings. She nodded again as she turned away, as though the fiddle was a secret that they shared. . . .

"I'm feared to let it out o' my sight," Kit explained in an apologetic tone. "Marget was that set on shoving it in the fire."

"Ay, well, it'll be safe enough here," Agnes said. "It'll be safe as the Bible and precious as bright gold." She went to a brass-handled drawer and whipped out a snowy square of a cloth which she laid across the strings. "Thomas mun make you a box for it," she went on; "a nice warm box as'll keep it out o' the damp."

Thomas said he would start on it first thing, in a tone that meant he was glad of something to say. Of course he was quite sure now, as Agnes was sure, but as yet he could not copy her conversational ease. "A grand warm box'll be just the ticket," he said. "It'll be better and snugger a deal when it's gitten a box."

Kit said they were right kind, and settled himself in his chair, staring in front of him at the shining hearth. He did not like to say that he would not have the box, and that he hated to see the fiddle covered up. The white cloth looked for all the world like a little shroud, and the box would be only a coffin in his eyes. He did not mean to have the box whatever they said, but it wouldn't be manners to tell them so right off. There seemed no letting him and his fiddle alone, though all that folks could do for him was to let him alone. It was just the way

Thomas had bothered him in the field, showing him things he didn't want to see. Well, he would slip away from them later on, but now he must mind his manners and let be.

He roused himself with a little attempt at cheer. "Ay, well, I've landed at last!" he said, with a smile. "I never thought I'd see the old spot again."

Thomas and Agnes gave him a double beam. "It's a sight for sore eyes to see you here, I'm sure!"

"Marget wasn't best pleased at me coming away," the old man said. "She's had a deal to say about it, these last few week."

"And wi' the rough side of her tongue for it, I'll swear!" Thomas laughed. "I heard tell she was taking on and terble wild. Ay, well, you'll have none o' that wi' Agnes, don't you fret."

Agnes threw him a laughing glance, and said it was early days to talk like that. Happen, if he waited, she would show him different, later on. Thomas, however, wasn't to be put off. "There isn't a smarter lass in the country-side," he said, "and she's a rare hand at managing a house." The showman in him was aching to be out, and he was driven as well by an urgent need that he didn't know how to explain. It was as if he was bent upon manufacturing a

barrier of good things, an insurmountable barrier of comforts and kind words. . . . He had a sense of delicacy about beginning to praise the house, but it couldn't be taken amiss if he praised his wife. "She'll do you that well you'll think you're the king," he said, "and she's as bonny as they make 'em, as you can see for yourself."

"Marget's not much in the way o' looks," Kit said. "She's the cankert sort, is Marget, wi' a nippit nose."

Thomas laughed and said it was just as well she couldn't hear, but the bitter disparagement gave him a slight shock. It had never been like his father to say bitter things. He had had a good word for every erring soul, a tolerant explanation for every doubtful deed. Marget must have been dreadful indeed to have altered him like that. The thought of his own share in the matter troubled Thomas's heart. "Bob's catched a Tartar," he added, after a while. "He darsent call his soul his own, poor lad!"

"Ay, she keeps folk stirring, Marget does," Kit said, but after his little outburst he sat quiet. It was strange how Marget was present with him even here, so that he could not so much as open his mouth but she came jumping out. He tried to put her away from him as he watched Agnes moving about the hearth, all

colour and curves and deft handling and neat ways. Agnes was flushed with the excitement of the occasion, and her eyes shone when she smiled. He could not remember that he had ever seen Marget smile except for the purpose of a sneer. She had never even smiled at the red-haired baby or Bob, and certainly not at the daft old man who was only a burden in the house. He liked a smiling face, but it embar rassed him as well, because he had forgotten what to do with people who smiled. That was why he shifted his eyes when Agnes looked his way, though he watched her again as soon as she left him alone. He liked her air of hurry without fuss, which filled the room with a vigour that did not fret. Marget would have spilt the kettle over the fender and one of the brats, and in the midst of the hissing and howling would have blamed himself. Somehow he could not picture Agnes ever spilling a drop. She brought the grand new tea-pot to be filled on the hearth, and the room was reflected in its polished side. Her blue gown, crossing and crossing the bars of gold, made him think of a coloured bird that kept flashing through the sun. From his window at Marget's he had often watched the swifts darting and dipping in the evening light. The tiny whir of their wings across the pane had come to him in a

series of little shocks. The long, pointed wings were like little slender swords, crossing and darting and never getting home. Now, if he looked from the farm-window, he would see the birds of the marsh, the long legs of the heron and the stately swing of the gull. The redshank and the curlew he would see lonely on the sands . . . yet here he was busy thinking of Marget's and the swifts.

It seemed as if the farther he went away from Marget's the closer it followed up. Just at first he had seemed to leave it right behind, and yet in the heart of the dream it was waiting on the step. The one door of the viaduct that he had seen still wide had not succeeded in closing, after all. That meant that, when he went to bed, he would not be safe, because Marget might come and peer at him as he slept. The thing that might have swamped her and shut her out had not so much as begun to come to pass. He could not conjure her out of the house, because magic had failed him as he stepped inside. If there was anything there that belonged to himself, it had done nothing for him yet but make him sad. Yet he couldn't help feeling that the joy was only slightly out of reach ; as if he looked at it through a window, but could not come inside. His heart was heavy, as heavy as wet grass. Nothing, he told him-

self, was going right. Even the chair he sat in wasn't right.

"I doubt I mun be getting old bones," he said at last. "Chair don't seem to fit me same as it used."

Thomas had been busy with a contented little whistled tune, but he broke it off in the middle when his father spoke. "'Tisn't the old chair, dad," he said, a little abashed. "Yon went wi' the rest o' the furniture at the sale."

Kit stared at him a moment with a puzzled frown, and then, as if still at a loss, he dropped his gaze to the chair. Thomas saw that he was thinking hard as he ran his hands repeatedly over the arms. While he was at Marget's he had remembered many sales, but apparently he had never remembered his own. In those crowds of his he had seen many a chair sold, but his own had never come to the hammer under his eyes. How could it do anything of the sort when it had stayed safely in the dream, waiting in the house until he should come back? Yet it had vanished, after all, when the dream had come about, and there was only this false pretender in its place. When he stopped rubbing the arms he peered at the legs, and twisted round to stare at the leather back. It was a shop-chair, that was plain, varnished and hard-stuffed, unyielding as old bread. It almost

seemed to reject him as he sat, refusing the purpose for which it had been made. It was handsome enough to look at, of its kind, making a great show with leather and brass nails, but as yet it was only an effigy of a chair. No ghost as yet had clung to its hard seat, those stubborn ghosts which hammers couldn't eject. No shadowy arms would steal and clasp him round as he sighed himself asleep on a twilit afternoon. It was a mindless chair, a chair without a soul, the price of which was the sacrifice of death. Generations must use it before it grew a soul; lover sitting on lover's knee, children clambering about its legs. Dreams of the winter dusk would have to shut it round; the sick, the dying, console themselves in its arms. There was a long education before the new armchair, and he himself was the sacrifice it asked. . . .

"House is furnished every bit new," Thomas said. "But I got chair as near the old one as I could."

"Oh, ay, it's a grand chair, thank ye—real smart."

"Nay, I doubt it isn't much, but it's the best we've got."

"Marget wouldn't ha' let me set in the best chair."

"You shall set where you like, Father, in

this house!" Agnes flashed. "It's queer if you can't do as suits you best, I'm sure!"

Kit said she was right kind, and let his arms lie slackly along the arms of the new chair. The bright leather was cool and slippery to his sensitive old hands. The old chair had been covered with carpet that was rough to the touch—dark green and threadbare in many spots, with a pattern of ringed daisies centred by a faded rose. . . . It was all very well to say that he might choose; he was pinned to this new horror, nevertheless. Not here, any more than at Marget's, could he sit exactly where he wished. . . .

"Likely you've noticed we've a new kitchen range? Landlord said it was t'best as could be got."

"Ay, I see it first thing," Kit said, and looked away.

"Walls is new-washed, of course, and paint's new, too. Yon old winder-sash gone——"

"Ay."

"—new sink in back kitchen . . . cupboards . . . carpet on t'stairs——"

Agnes made a noise with the pot, and said the tea was mashed and they'd best set to. It was just like Thomas to spoil her pet surprise, but luckily it passed the old man by. He rose to his feet obediently when she spoke,

and was set at the table, still in the hated chair. Agnes was telling him he wanted his tea, and he tried to agree with her, knowing that he lied. The light from the west still lay across the room, and blinded and hurt his unaccustomed eyes. He could not see the table as Agnes hoped he might—as she herself saw it with an artist's pride. For her, every detail stood out on the whiteness of the cloth, coloured and glorified by the clear sun. The light was cool as water on china and polished plate, and rich on yellow butter and the pink surface of the ham. There were creamy scones and a gingerbread cake . . . lavender in a vase . . . deep crimson jam and eggs with warm brown shells. A white geranium stood on a sill, showing the sky behind it far and blue. . . .

Thomas carved the ham and went on talking about the house. "There's a deal that's new above-stairs as well; beds and quilts and such-like, and a deal besides. You could eat off the floors as easy as yon dish. Missis keeps the place like a new pin."

"Marget's nobbut a dirty slut," Kit said. "Last week I come a terble bang over a pail."

"Eh, now, but yon was wicked, if you like!" Agnes's eyes dwelt pityingly upon him as she passed the tea. "She might ha' finished you," Thomas added, handing ham.

Kit said he doubted she wouldn't have troubled if she had, and sat back, staring vacantly at his plate. His face looked worn and white now that the expression of almost venomous hate had died away. Thomas, busily carving, heard the hate in his voice, and again was conscious of a little shock. Kit himself was as puzzled by his vehemence as his son was jarred. Never before had he even thought of Marget in the terms he had used to-day. His tongue, like the rest of his body, had been in jail, and was only now beginning to be loosed. Yet his look was not the look of a man who was brooding on the past. That savage face belonged to a man in an unknown place . . . betrayed. . . .

And then he was back in the past, away from Beautiful End, back in the cottage where Marget's pails lay hoping for his feet. This one had lurked in secret on the stair, and he had come on it hoping, and hurtled into space. Afterwards he and the fiddle sat on the bottom step, shaking and crying together in their pain. Nobody came near them however long they cried, though once the face of a neighbour showed scared beyond the door. Presently he had climbed the stair and gone back again to his room—to dream of his home where pails were kept in place. It was strange that now he was home he should wander away, to shake and

pant and cry on the bottom step. It was strange he should long for that room now he was here, wanting that wretchedness beyond this grace. . . .

Marget was in the mind of the others, too, it seemed. "Bob said she was fit to scratch when they come away," Thomas was busy relating to his wife. "He made sure there'd be a row in the street, but she thought better o' that. All the same, there was a grand to-do aforehand, so he said!"

"Jealous—that's what it is!" Agnes answered with a toss of the head. She gave vent to a short laugh as well, and the laugh was a mixture of satisfaction and contempt. Kind as she was, and generous to a fault, she couldn't help gloating over Marget to-day. She and Thomas were doing a beautiful thing, but little, sordid thoughts kept creeping in. Somewhere at the back of their minds they were gloating over Marget all the time. Of course she was bound to be jealous of their better luck—the unlovable woman with the wretched house. It must have irked her to see Kit driving off, knowing how glad he was to get away. She was bound to envy the bride with her pleasant home, her brand-new furniture and four-pronged forks. Those who sit in the sun are so sure of the envy of those in the shade. In any case, Marget

could have nothing to offer that could possibly compare. Agnes's nature was nearly all pure gold, but the bit of alloy that was in it sounded in that laugh. Besides, how could she feel anything but secure, glowing in secret over that room upstairs ?

The security in the laugh tempted Thomas into further speech. There could be no harm now in telling her the other things that Bob had said. " Ay, but hark ye," he added, " what d'ye think o' this ? Bob had it the old man mightn't settle, after all. ' I'll be at Low Moss End for an hour or two,' he said, ' and if he doesn't feel like stopping, I'll take him back.' "

" Not settle, did you say ? " Agnes stared at him open-mouthed.

" Ay."

" Take him back ? "

" Yon's what he said."

" Well, did you ever hear the likes o' that ! " This time the laugh was on a harder note. . . . " What's wrong, Father ? " she added, kindly again, seeing the old man gazing at his cup.

" I doubt you've given me the wrong mug, my lass. Mine was a sort o' blue chiney, wi' a pink rose."

" Yon went at sale an' all," Thomas explained, " but I got as near a match as they had in t'shop."

Kit said the mug was grand and would do right well, but a little colour came in his face, and he felt ashamed as he had done in the field. They must be thinking he was going daft, losing his senses because of his great age. He kept waiting and waiting for the things that were in his dream, and didn't seem able to grasp the things that were under his nose. He winced when Thomas talked of "getting a match," because you couldn't match the furniture of a dream. Even if the mug had managed to look the same, he would have known when he touched it that it wasn't his. Still, the thing to remember was that Thomas had done his best. "Tea'll sup right enough out of it, I'll be bound," he said. "Yon as Marget give me was every bit cracked. . . ."

"Old folks should have the best of what's going," Agnes said. She knew the best was on the table to-night, but he did not seem to be making much of a meal. Perhaps exeitement had taken his appetite away, or more probably he was over-tired with the slow drive. Now and then he looked again at the alien "mug," but she never saw him lift it to his lips. Old folks always wanted a little tempting to their food, but she had been so certain he would be suited to-night. A vague sense of disappointment touched her mind, in spite of the fact that it

was still busy with Bob's words. "I never hear such a thing as that about Bob!" she said again. "Surely to goodness Father's had enough o' his spot!"

"Ay, well, if he's set on waiting, I reckon nobody'll say him nay. He'll nobbut be throwing away his time an' that'll be all."

"It's Marget's nastiness—that's what it is!" Agnes frowned. "She knows he's glad to be shot of her, and she's by way of having a slap."

"That's about it," Thomas agreed, with a nod. He was glad now that he had spoken out, because Agnes had laid the bogey right away. First she had laughed, and then she had gone to the root of the matter and shown him the cause. The shadow lying on that first good hour had only been thrown by jealousy, after all. Bob had seen all the changes and novelties at the farm, and of course Agnes would know about them, too. It was Marget who gave the slap, as Agnes said; Bob was only the arm through which it struck. Jealousy—that was it; nothing but jealous lies. Under all the roofs of the kingdom none would be happier than Kit. . . .

And Kit had fallen back again in his chair, staring vacantly in front of him with lifeless eyes. He was staring straight through the window that held the rolled-back sea, but all

that he really saw was a cottage-kitchen wall. As far as he knew, he was back at Marget's again, at the inhospitable board which he had loathed. Thomas saw that his plate of food was barely touched, and that the cup of tea had never been touched at all. His hands, lying at rest along the cloth, pointed knife and fork towards the roof. . . . His son reached a gentle finger towards his arm, and at once he shrank away as at a blow. Knife and fork went clattering down as he clutched at his knee for the fiddle that wasn't there. Finding nothing, he glanced furtively from his companions to the floor, and then terror seized him, and he looked wildly around the room. Quite suddenly he became still again when he saw the fiddle under the shroud. He frowned a little, and made as if to rise ; and then remembrance came into his eyes, and he sank back. Thomas, waiting for that moment, drew a breath of relief. . . .

His voice, slow and easy, broke the last of the spell. . . . " You're getting on terble badly wi' your tea. I doubt you're not taking kindly to the ham."

Kit said the ham was grand, as he had said of the cup, and the smug, terrible chair that was waiting for him to die. He had always been partial to ham, he said, and Marget had never given him as much as a slice. But, all the same,

he made no attempt to empty his plate, and his knife and fork were under the table and he let them lie. "It don't taste quite the same as it used," he pleaded at last. "I reckon there's no pigs gangs down just like your own. . . ."

He felt ashamed of himself again when he saw the disappointment in Agnes's face, but she did not try to force him into eating the ham against his will. She did not even say that folks were hard to suit, as Marget most certainly would have said. "Have a bit o' butter wi' your bread," she coaxed instead, pushing the shining pat within his reach, and he felt comforted for a moment, and forgot that he had seen Marget sitting in her place. He made a determined effort to receive an impression of light and space, of comfort and kindliness and the atmosphere of home. He said to himself peace where there was no peace, and not for one moment did he succeed. Agnes was busy talking about Marget again, and he pushed the butter away and drifted back. . . . Nothing had happened to rescue him from prison, after all, and he was in danger of losing his home of vision as well. . . .

"We'll have a trap, one o' these days," Agnes was saying, "and ride round by Bob's. Marget'll be madder than ever when she sees Father getting that perked up and fat!"

"He shall play fiddle all down t'road," Thomas grinned, "an' Marget'll just have to bide and let him be!" They looked at each other across the table and laughed, and Thomas leaned back in his chair and chuckled and slapped his knee. They were so busy with the picture in their minds that they forgot to notice anything else. "Eh, well, never mind her, poor crabt body!" he finished at last. He took up his knife and fork with a smile still lingering on his face, and felt his father's aloofness in the silence like a chill current in a quiet stream. The fork half-raised in the air came to a halt. . . . "Butter not right, neither, eh, old dad?"

"It's grand butter, but I doubt it's not like it used. Your mother was t'best butter-maker in t'country-side."

"You must learn me different next time I churn," Agnes told him with a good-tempered smile. "Likely I'll shape to do better after a bit."

"You're a good lass," the old man said suddenly, looking her in the face, and for the first time his voice sounded warm and strong. Their eyes met in full and happy accord, and their smiles mingled like the smiles of intimate friends. Their natures, each kindly and beautiful in its way, reached out one to the other and were enriched. Just for a moment she saw him

as he had been when he was young, the affectionate, dreamy soul whom so many had helped and loved. He in his turn saw her as the future of the place, the soul that was making the new dream for the house. The beauty of kindness and good humour and happy work, she was bringing it all these, just as his own wife had brought them long ago. But it was a new beauty, and there was no place in it for him; he had his own, and his own was quite complete. Now he was beginning to see what he had done —how he had wandered into another's dream of home. There was no room for him here unless he was ready to renounce his own, a thing which he had not thought possible even with death. Already he was being punished as those are punished who are false to their dreams; he could neither look forward happily nor yet behind. Suddenly he was conscious of being stifled by the pleasant room, oppressed by the fire and the sun and the smell of the food. His eyes dropped wearily from the girl's face, and age and blankness came back to his own. "It's terble warm," he said, in a fretted tone, and pushed back his chair sharply and got to his feet. "I'll gang out," he added, looking towards the door. "I partly what think I'll be easier outside."

Thomas pushed away his plate, though rather

regretfully, and got to his feet, too. "Ay, do," he answered as heartily as he could, though he did not look at his father while he spoke. He did not look at his wife, either, though it was only a minute since they had laughed at each other across the cups. He knew as well as she that they had expected to linger over the meal, talking so fast they were on each other's heels, and digging old stories together out of the past. They had expected to hear the old man laugh and crack his joke, but so far the laughter and jokes had all been theirs. There descended upon them again a stage chill, such as Thomas had sampled on his coming in. Then, however, the scene had waited for an actor that didn't appear. Now the curtain was down too soon on a set that had been the work of months. Thomas gulped his tea hurriedly and looked longingly at the scones, and then looked hastily away and felt ashamed. . . .

"You've nobbut made a terble poor tea," Agnes said wistfully to the guest.

"Nay, I've done rarely, thank ye, missis, that I have. Now I come to think on, I'd summat on t'road."

"Nobbut a sparrow-peck, that's what it is! Cat would ha' eaten more, I'm sure."

"I've a new pipe for you, Father," Thomas put in, fumbling about the mantel for his gift.

"Ay, an' there's bacca an' all for you in a tin."

"It's more than a while now since I'd a pipe. Marget can't abide smoke about a house."

"Seems she can't abide owt as gives folk pleasure!" Agnes carped. There was something hurt and aggrieved in her voice that had not been there before; something graver, as well, as if the tone of her mind had changed. She still sat at the table, looking straight before her over the pots, and never once at the couple busy with the pipe. The meal had indeed been a sacrifice of sorts, and never a whiff of smoke had gone up from it to heaven. The gods had slept while the oblation was being made, and now there was nothing to do but to clear away. At least the fault, if there was a fault, was none of hers. Things never happened as one expected, of course. . . .

Kit was holding the pipe limply in his hand, another stranger pretending to be a friend. His son's eyes were set hopefully on his face, waiting for a look of cheer.

"I'll fill it, shall I?" he asked.

"You're right kind."

"Likely you'd be better suited wi' twist!"

"Nay, not I. Bacca'll do grand."

Thomas said, "Yon's the ticket!" and

handed over the pipe, and Kit took it and held it limply as before. "Where's t'laylock?" he asked suddenly, staring through the porch. "You've never hagged down yon laylock as used to be by t'door?"

"Nay, not I," Thomas said, with honest regret. "'Twas wind as took it—yon gale we had in March. A terble storm it was, to be sure! I made certain house was going an' all."

"I never heard tell as laylock was gone," Kit said. He spoke the words very slowly, because he was thinking back. He remembered the storm, and how he had never slept the whole night long, not because he was afraid, but because it brought the sound of the sea. The chestnuts close to his window had been like giants raving in the dark, and now and then one hewed a limb from another and sent it crashing down. He had sat in a whistling draught and pictured the long waves breaking on the shore, and heard the long roar of succession filling the farm-house. The yew tree, of course, would neither break nor bend, and the lilac would bend but it would never break. Morning showed great boughs across the road, but the trees of his dream were still untouched and whole. No gale that blew could harm the trees of his dream; and yet that storm had brought the lilac down. . . .

"I never thought on to say," Thomas answered with a troubled air. "I'm sorry about laylock, but there's a new seat down by t'hedge. You'll find it rarely snug, if you want to be setting out."

Kit looked through the window at the neat new object of painted boards, set where the light from the west would trouble and dazzle his eyes. The seat by the lilac had been turned away from the west, so that he might rest his eyes on the evening peace of the fields. It had been sheltered, too, by the tree and the porch, so that even in winter it was warm. The new seat looked snug in the thick of the fence, but there was no shade over it for his head, and when the leaves were gone the wind would come thinly through. Worst of all, it was painted the same colour as the meadow gate, that terrible hard blue that was like a blow. It was horrible what things you could do with a pot of paint; but, then, as they knew on the marsh, he had never cared for paint. . . .

"Ay, it's snug," he said very politely, and turned the pipe over in his hand.

"We'll get by, then," Thomas said, "while missis sides the pots." He was already, almost thankfully, in the porch.

"Nay, I don't rightly think——"

"What's amiss?"

"Laylock's gone, d'ye see, and I doubt I can't smoke anywheres else." He set the pipe aside, gently, but with a final air.

"What, there was no laylock at Marget's, was there?" Thomas asked and stared.

"Nay, not as folk knowed."

"Losh save us—what d'ye mean by that?"

Agnes stood up suddenly with a brusque movement, and began to gather the plates together in a pile. When she spoke it was still without looking at either of the men. "Now, then, don't be fretting him, Thomas. Let him be. He'll find his way about, after a bit."

"Gox, you talk for all the world as if he was strange folk come to stay!"

"Happen there's none so strange as them that comes home." The words came almost absently from the old man's lips, as if he was answering, unknown to himself, some echo out of the air. He moved away from the couple to where the fiddle lay, and began to draw the cloth from the taut strings. Thomas looked from his father to his wife, but now it was she who would not meet his eyes. With a movement that was almost symbolic he came into the room and shut the door; the only time, as he knew, that it had been shut that day. He stood in the middle of the floor between the two who were so intent—the man bent over

the fiddle and the woman over her pots. The impulse to question was still strong in his mind, but Agnes turned before he could speak, and thrust the plates commandingly into his hands.

"Leave him be for a bit," she said in a lowered tone. "Likely he's tired, and we're bothering him over much. Carry pots for me, will you, there's a good lad?"

He shut his mouth with an effort, and helped her to clear away, tramping obediently between the front kitchen and the back. Agnes went about her business as if there were nobody there, but Thomas could not resist an occasional glance at the silent guest. He had drawn the shroud away from the fiddle's face, and when they were not looking, he let it drop behind the table to the floor. He drew a breath of relief when he had done that, and felt a little soothed now that the fiddle was in his hands. He gathered it close to him and stood quiet, letting his glance go stealthily round the room. Now he could reckon every change to the full, the paint and the new furniture and the kitchen grate. He looked at the white-faced clock and the table and the shelf with the books. He looked at the new chair over and over again, and every time he looked it was still new. Dimly, though Agnes never guessed anything of the sort, he realised the new carpet on the

stairs. . . . Only into the old mirror he steadily refused to look, because of the power that lies lurking in a glass. He looked out of the window for his lilac tree. Once or twice he glanced furtively at the door. . . .

Thomas plodded in and out with the pots, a little more hopeful when he was coming back, and a little more troubled when he went away. He said to himself again that things were wrong, that with every minute that passed they were going wrong. So far the old man hadn't "settled" in the least, and only a blind donkey could pretend that he had. The situation which they had plotted with such care seemed to be getting completely out of hand. They saw their pleasant surprises turn to disappointments as they looked, and could do nothing but watch the change with pained amaze. There had been the chair and the mug, and the pipe and bacca and the seat, and Heaven knew how many other things besides. It was just as if they were all bewitched and upside down, and instead of righting themselves they were getting deeper under the spell. He stared at the old man standing like a stock, and felt there was something sinister in his look. He had an air of waiting for something, listening and looking out—something that was a terrible time on the road. He did not look at home in the very

least—a happy old body coming home to stay. Thomas thought it was time that somebody said a word. . . . So after his last trip he halted and spoke. . . .

"Yon'll be an old fiddle, I doubt, by now?"

"Nay. Fiddles is always young."

"Old as time gangs, I mean, yon's all." He looked at the shining thing that he had known so well, and Agnes came to the inner door and listened, drying a pot. "It's sung Bob an' me to sleep many a time when we were barns. There's whiles I wake even yet, hearing music somewheres in the dark."

"I'll be bound Marget's barns isn't fiddled to sleep!" the young wife scoffed behind their backs.

"There's never no music at Marget's that she can hear. . . . Never a note from dawn to dusk, barring what the birds make in the eaves."

"Ay, well, we'd music to bed and board," said his son. "An' then, when we were grown lads, we daneed to fiddle instead. Nobody could ever play up our feet like the old dad."

"Many a lad and lass it's danced into love."

"Us among 'em—didn't it, Agnes?—us an' all! We're married folk now," Thomas added, "but I reckon we can danee a bit still.

Agnes finished the pot, and her eyes bright-

ened with a new idea. "Get Father to give us a tune," she said, "an' we'll show him what we can do, right off."

"It's over soon, I doubt." Thomas hesitated, taken aback. "Ay, well, why not?" he added, with a laugh. "'Tisn't every day as'll bring the old man home!"

"Nay, it's over soon, as you say." Agnes affected to withdraw. "We'd best not worrit him. He's tired."

"Nay, not I!" A sudden lightness and strength came into Kit's voice, and his face brightened and he tried to smile. "I'll be main glad," he said, and straightened his back. All his fiddler's pride was aroused by the implication that he was too tired to answer the call to his art. His hands went eagerly to the smooth pegs, as he started to tune. Life and meaning came back into his eyes. . . .

"You're bound to be a bit done, all the same. I reckon we'd best let the music be, to-night."

"I'm as fresh as a lemon, I tell ye!" the old man said. His tone was suddenly testy, almost sharp, and the young folk smiled at each other aside.

"Ay, well, then, Thomas, shove the table back. We'll show Father we've got a foot to us both yet. . . ."

Thomas went for the big table with zest, his

heart light in him now as a sail at sea. As if by a miracle the whole atmosphere had cleared, transformed in a moment by a simple speech. Now it was sane and happy and almost gay, just as they had always expected it to be. He had been nearly troubled to tears by his father's look—that hang-dog look, that look of a trapped beast. In the back kitchen he had questioned Agnes as to what they had done . . . what they had left undone . . . what was wrong. He couldn't be homesick for Marget's after all he had suffered at her hands, and yet even at Marget's he had never looked like that. There were changes about the place, of course—and none too soon ; he couldn't have hoped to find it just the same. And yet all the time he seemed to be looking out—waiting for something . . . seeking—what ?

" He's strange—nowt else," Agnes said in reply, hiding herself behind a cupboard door.

" Strange ? In his own spot ? "

" Ay."

" Land's sake ! Whatever for ? "

" Nay, I don't know," she answered, still hiding behind the door. " Old folks is easy put about, but he'll not be strange long." Her own confidence had been sadly shaken by the failure of the meal, and then suddenly she had remembered the room upstairs. They ought to have

known that coming home made people sorry as well as glad, but the night when it came would bring its special peace. To-morrow they would look back and wonder what had gone awry. . . . But she did not want to remind Thomas of that upstairs room. He would be telling his father before he could be stopped, clumsily forestalling the first effect. So she listened in silence and let him worry away, pushing his cap further and further to the back of his puzzled head. All she did was to hide behind the door, and say in the pause that " he wouldn't be strange long."

And then, after all, the change had come about long before there was any sign of night. Thomas couldn't help feeling terribly set up because at last he had thought of the tactful thing to say. It was true that it was Agnes who had suggested the dance, but the opening remark about the fiddle had been his. They should have turned the talk upon fiddles long before, and then perhaps they would have had a decent meal. The old man's trouble, whatever it had been, seemed to have slipped right away now that he was about to give them a tune. The very look of him had altered, almost out of belief. His eyes were young again and his movements were certain and brisk. He leaned against the table with the fiddle under his chin, trying the single notes with his finger and the chords with his

fine bow. The fiddle answered him in a full, penetrating voice, ringing loud in the airy house that had no neighbour but the sea. He bent his ear to it and fixed his eyes on the strings, his whole being absorbed by the presence behind the voice. . . .

"I doubt there's not over much room." Thomas gave the last piece of furniture a final shove. "There's not that many on us, though, to get in each other's road. I reckon we don't need Harry Dixon's barn."

"There's nowt like a dance in a barn." Kit spoke dreamily, without so much as lifting his head. "There it be, all light and laughing inside, and outside all the gert night looking in through the doors. It's summer, happen, wi' folk coming through the meadow-grass, holding their gowns to keep 'em off the dew. An' t'others coming along the lanes, wi' the sound o' beck-water rushing by."

"Ay. Yon's how it was," Thomas said gently. "Wasn't it, lass?"

"Ay," Agnes said, and sighed. "A bonny time!"

"There's bettermer times now," he insisted stoutly, but she shook her head. She knew already that there were no "bettermer" times.

Now they had cleared the room as much as they could, and were standing together in the

middle of the floor. It had hurt Agnes a little to have to upset the room, even in so pleasant a cause as this. She had spent so long in planning it all out, and now you might have thought, from the look of things, that it was the night before a sale. The new chair, that had sat so smugly on the hearth, had been pushed into a corner to look on, as well as the little footstool that she had covered with red cloth. This was the chair's first lesson in life, if she had known ; it would never be quite such a smug outsider, after this. . . . But she had liked to see it neatly on the hearth, just as she had preferred the table spread with food, and this sudden dismantling hurt her homely pride. Yet the comfort and order had done nothing to cheer the poor old man who was looking for a home. He hadn't even begun to look happy until it was done away. She felt a moment's terrible qualm for the sanctuary upstairs. . . .

"Now, then, folks—get yourselves set!" Kit stopped his tuning and threw up his head, his eyes roving commandingly over the room. He refused a chair and settled himself firmly against the table edge. His face had hardened a little, and his mouth was stern. He was master now, as he had always been when he played, half-god and artist, never the hireling of the crowd. Gentle as he was in everything

else, he was always supremely the autocrat in this. Once he had quitted a ball at its very height, because the dancers had gone against his will. Now, as he motioned the couple into place, the sweep of his bow was like the sweep of a sword. . . .

"Baint it fine to see him so pleased?" Agnes whispered, as she took her stand. Just for a moment they felt foolish standing there, this serious, new-wed couple with their brand-new house. But the dancing that was bred in them soon got the better of that, as well as the growing atmosphere of the past. Almost at once they threw themselves into their parts as Kit had thrown himself into his. Thomas became the fiercely-diffident youth, whose feet had always been nimbler than his tongue; Agnes, the spoilt favourite of a crowded ball. She turned to the old man with a smile that had won her many a tune before to-day.

"Be it a reel, Mr. Fiddler? I hope it's a reel."

"Ay, it's a reel," he conceded with a lordly nod, though he had settled to give them a reel from the very start.

Thomas said, "Ay, make it a reel!" in a gruff, shy voice, the voice of the youth whose only way of expression was through his dancing feet. All of them felt the thrill of the word each

time that it was said, the lilt and beat of the tune in their brains and heels. The old feeling came back that life was only lived from dance to dance. The ecstasy came back, the almost insolent sense of power ; the passion of motion, the thrill of mutual purpose and touch. The very air of the kitchen seemed to change and become mistily lamp-lit, throbbing to many hearts. Over the house there was no longer the clear arch of the evening light, but a roof of darkness, powdered with steady stars. The man and the girl felt dancers all around ; sometimes they touched a shoulder or an arm. They were all waiting for the fiddle to begin, lasses in bright colours, and lads in their best clothes. Now and then somebody laughed or threw a challenge across the room, but as soon as the music started they would all be dumb. Through the mist showed the warm colours and shining hair, bright eyes and gleaming teeth, young, happy faces, and figures come to their first strength. They were all friends and acquaintances who were there, folks who had danced together through the round of the years. Agnes saw smiling girlish faces in the crowd, and men's eyes that smiled and lingered on hers. Once she saw Marget, young and trim and cold ; and Bob watching her, sulking by a door. She saw Thomas, the Thomas she had lost, who was no

more the man she had married than any in the room. What that Thomas had given her she would never find again, the breathless vision of the unexplored. The dogged face, the brooding, pleading eyes, the touch of a spirit strange to her as yet—even the memory of them caught her by the throat. She found her heart beating and her cheek grown hot. This life in her hands to crown or throw away . . . no, there was never another moment quite like that.

The little sordidness came creeping back. "I wish Marget could clap eyes on the old man now!"

"Ay, so do I!"

Kit waved again. "Whisht, will ye! I'm just off."

"Right, Father! We're ready."

"We're all set."

"Now!"

He lifted his bow high, and the atmosphere tightened like a string. It was like waiting for the striking of a flame, the first touch of lips, or the dead coming out of a grave. All the grace of youth was in the curve of his arm; the certainty of his knowledge in his thrilling fingertips. He leaned his ear to the fiddle as to a secret bound to be told. His face held expression behind expression, like the endless perspective of images in a pool, but at the back of all

was the passionate gravity of the artist at his task. Old as he was, the sense of power that was strong in the others was stronger far in him. All who had ever danced to his piping waited upon his nod; feet by the hundred ached for the loosed tune. Now, now, before all the gods he was a god, as well. . . .

And then slowly, as the note still hung in the balance, his face chilled and changed. The fiddle was as full of music as it would hold, but just for the moment it would not give it up. All those months of silence it had been singing to itself, and now the racing torrent was choking its throat. Slowly his bow sank . . . slowly . . . and sank. . . .

"Nay, it's ganged."

"What's ganged, Father?"

"The music."

"It'll come back right enough," Thomas said in a cheerful tone. "Let's see if I can mind the tune." He pursed his lips to whistle, thought a moment, and began. "Yon's it."

"Ay, yon's it." He bent to the fiddle again. "I've got it now." The moment that was like a sharpened string drew to its length again and snapped like a string. . . . "Nay, I've not."

"It's like this, you'll think on," Agnes put in. She started to hum the air in a gay little voice, and Kit nodded his head and listened and said

"Ay." She beat out the time with her foot, and the fiddle went up and down. Then he lifted his bow and waited . . . and listened again. . . . "Nay, it's ganged."

"We'll give him a lead, missis!" Thomas cried, and began to whistle the music very loud. At once they flung themselves eagerly into the dance, lithe, earnest figures making their neat, light steps. As they danced he whistled and she sang, until the house was filled with the tune from floor to roof. The very flags of the kitchen seemed to sway to the air; it seemed impossible that the old man could not hear. Faster and faster they speeded it up, and, as they whirled, their eyes met once and again, and then they smiled. Every moment they looked for the fiddle to join in, putting fresh life and rhythm into their feet. And instead they heard the old man's voice crying aloud, harsh with the harshness of great pain and fear. He struck the table soundingly with his open palm.

"Whisht, will ye? Whisht! Didn't I say it was ganged?"

Now he was straight on his feet and gazing blankly round, not seeming to see them where they had fallen apart. . . . "There's nowt left o' the things I used to know."

"You're out o' practice," Thomas murmured

in an uncertain tone ; and Agnes added—" It's Marget's blame, for never letting you play."

" Ay, but she let me nurse fiddle on my knee, and tunes was singing in my head all the time. Now I've come back and they waint sing no more."

" You'll see they'll sing right enough afore so long."

He covered them again with the same unseeing eyes.

" I'd ha' done better to stop where I were."

Agnes put out her hand at that with a little cry. " Nay, now, Father, you mustn't talk like that ! "

" At Marget's I see this spot as plain as plain, and my missis stirring through the rooms. I see the bits o' sticks we bought when we was wed, and the hearth where we set together of a night. But now I'm back I can't see any o' they things no more."

" Times change, dad," pleaded his son, " but we'll make you comfortable, I'm sure."

" You can't bring back the dead to the lone living. You can't put back the laylock by the door."

" Nay, I wish I could ! " Thomas's face fell.

" At Marget's I had 'em both."

" It's your old home, think on," Agnes said wistfully, but he shook his head.

" 'Tisn't home when the music's all ganged."

A silence fell on the three of them after that, the silence of helplessness ceasing from futile speech. There are things that cannot happen to our desire because we have stopped the way for them ourselves. The gains of life are all of them had through loss, and for every coin that we take at least we must put a counter down. The old and the young folks had both shut a door at their backs, and when they tried to get through to each other the doors were barred. Kit knew that, since the music had failed, there was no place for him here. The music could only live where the dream lived, and he had left it behind. He had always risked the counters of life for fairy gold, and now all that remained to him was his invisible treasure of the heart. Comfort, position, peace in his last days—all must go into the fire to serve the fine flame of his dream. He was only a vague old man who had made a muddle of life, but firmly and fightingly he was sure of that. There was nothing here for him but the shell of lovely things grown strange. That which he had made for himself he might have, but nothing else. " For what we take we must pay, and the price is cruel hard."

And Thomas and Agnes, with their unaccepted oblation of satisfaction and thanks ? They, too, had taken, and would have to pay. . . .

"You'll settle after a bit," Thomas argued, but his voice was flat.

"I'll never settle, not I."

"It's early days to say that."

For the first time Kit looked him firmly in the face.

"I'm going back to Marget," he declared aloud.

Agnes uttered a sharp cry, and Thomas flushed. "Nay, Father, you're not," he answered, setting his mouth.

"Ay, but I am that. I shouldn't ha' come. Folks as gang once should bide away."

"What, she's as bad to you as an old witch!" Agnes broke out. "She's been bad to you all along. She doesn't do right by you at all."

"I care nowt for that if I have the rest." The stress and anguish had gone out of his face, as well as the look that sought and couldn't find. He looked older and frailer, but he looked certain and secure. The little strength that he had was going fast, but he would never have to try it like this again. He took a firm step towards the door, but Thomas put himself in between.

"Nay, then, you'll gang none!" he said through his shut teeth. The dark flush rose in his face to the roots of his hair. His voice was suddenly brutal, fierce and coarse. "What-

like fools d'ye think we'll look?" he cried; "and after all the trouble we've took an' all?"

"I've got to gang," Kit told him, looking him in the eyes.

"Well, you waint, an' that's flat!"

"Let me gang," the old man begged.

"Couldn't you bide just the one night?" Agnes coaxed. She came across to him and laid a hand on his arm. "You'll feel a deal better in t'morn, I'm sure, and it's real comfortable upstairs."

"I'm feared to gang upstairs. . . ." He shrank away from her, letting her hand drop. His eyes hated her—hostile, terrible eyes. He returned to the door. "Now, lad, get by."

"Nay."

He let himself go then, and became all fear and rage, a wild old creature fighting and raving to be free. "I'll not bide—I waint!" he cried, his voice rising and cracking as it rose. "I can't bide. I mun seek they things as is gone an' lost!" He clubbed the fiddle and came at his son with it raised in the air. "Mun I crack fiddle over thy danged head?"

"Let him be, the poor old man!" Agnes cried, weeping aloud, but Thomas's attitude had already changed. The futile act of defiance had shown him plainly the nature of his father's need. He must be out of himself to risk his

precious fiddle like that! He felt ashamed of himself, too, for bringing that evil into his kindly face. He moved away from the door, his expression softened, almost shocked. "Don't take on," he said gently. "You shall gang if you want."

"I can gang to Marget?" Kit demanded, hard of faith.

"Ay, if you're that set."

"We'd best be off, then, or we'll be missing Bob." He was still shaking a little in every limb, but now it was with excitement and relief. Close to the door, "Where's t'bundle?" he asked, wheeling round in a sudden scare. Marget would give it him, he knew, if he left the bundle behind. When he had left Marget's he had seemed half-dazed, hypnotised, as it were, into going against his will. Now he was all bustle and business, thinking for himself, straining every nerve to get away. . . .

"Here's t'bundle." Thomas took the red handkerchief from his wife.

"You've gone and hid my hat!" Again his voice rose.

"Nay, it's here."

The sun was leaving the kitchen at long last, but it was still smoothly golden on the sands. In garden and orchard the shadows were growing long, and the yew had a passing brother

on the ground. Out at sea there was a new life stirring, a new tide coming out of the deep, but where Agnes stood in the kitchen a vapoury shadow grew, pointing and reaching and deepening towards the stair. . . . Suddenly she ran to the old man and caught him round the neck.

"Eh, if you would nobbut try!" she said, with tears. "I can't abide to think o' you going back to yon hard woman and poor house!"

He waited patiently while she held him, but his eyes moved on. "It's never a poor house," he said, "where folks find their dreams. . . . Good-bye, my lass," he added, kindly enough, and hurried out, and did not stumble as he crossed the door. Thomas had to lengthen his stride to catch him on the path.

"I'll be best wi' Marget," Agnes heard him say, and almost at once she heard him say it again. She watched him until he was through the garden gate, but he never once looked back. Out of the sea-window she saw the tide come in.

"*Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail*
Or knock the breast . . . nothing but well and fair."

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